
The Tale of the Vampire Bride

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“The Tale of the Vampire Bride”

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This book is a work of fiction. People, places, events, and situation are the product of the author’s imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living, dead or undead, or historical events, is purely coincidence.

Dedicated with much love and affection to my mother, husband,
and my best friend, Dru.

Special thanks to Felicia for offering to edit this novel and to Helen for making sure it was properly English

Chapter 1

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright,
The Castle
4th of August, 1819

There is no solace in this place. I struggle to find it, but it eludes me. I have drifted through this castle like a specter, seeking to find one shred of comfort. This place is death. It reeks of it. Tastes of it. I can hear its cries on the wind, and I cannot hide from its cold touch.

How very odd that this sad little journal, with its tattered pages and frayed binding, should be my only companion. Yes, there are the others, but I am angry with them. I would rather curl up in this corner and record all that has occurred in this terrible place.

The death, the pain, the blood...so much blood...

It seems only proper to commit to paper the trials I have suffered, even if no one shall ever read this journal.

Sweet little diary, you are my one and only friend. Let me pour my words into you.

I shall write until my story in this place is fully told...

The cruel beauty of my surroundings filled me with a sense of dread, and I slipped one of my small-gloved hands under my father's strong, yet gentle fingers. With a tender smile, my father cradled my hand against his bony knee, squeezing it gently. I drew comfort from this small gesture of love as I gazed out at the brutal, majestic beauty of the Carpathian Mountains beyond the dirty carriage window.

Tilting my chin, I stared toward the high summits looming above the pass. The dark red curls framing my face danced in a breeze that was a soothing balm to my flushed skin.

Allow me pause to describe myself; I am a strange looking creature with the light olive complexion of my Italian mother and the red hair of my British father. My features have been described as classical: large aquamarine eyes, Roman nose, and a perfect little rosebud mouth.

"What do you think, my dearest?" Father asked me.

I smiled ruefully. "It's bloody awful."

"What an improper response for a young lady," Mother chided.

My mother sat across from my father, as dignified as one could be in a lurching carriage. With hair the color of bronze, eyes as blue as the Mediterranean, and her fine features still containing the illusion of youth, beautiful was the only word to describe my mother. Her one flaw was her sharp tongue, which was quicker and deadlier than any sword, or so my father liked to declare.

"What should I say then?"

My mother sighed and flung out a hand in exasperation. “She is your daughter, Edric. Please speak to her. I have not the strength left after this abominable ride.” She gave me one sharp piercing look, then turned to comfort my sister.

May sat wan and sickly, her dark blue eyes gazing fearfully from beneath her bonnet at the view beyond the carriage. I adored my younger sister, but she was always timid and fearful. I was forced to bully her into any adventure we undertook. She had not taken well to traveling and always seemed sick during our transits, whether by water or by land. “I believe we are going to fall down this mountain, Mama.”

“Don’t say such a thing, cara mia. We shall reach the village soon, and all will be well.”

“She never calls me cara mia,” I whispered to my father.

“There, there,” Father said in a rather bored voice, patting my hand.

The journey had been long and tiresome. We were all so very weary and cantankerous.

“Well, if we do fall off the mountain, I’m sure it will be quite a relief from all this traveling. One last bit of excitement in our boring lives,” I decided.

“Glynis, really,” Mother scolded.

Ignoring her, I opened the carriage window and leaned out to peer down the steep drop that lay a mere two feet from the spinning wheels of the carriage.

“Mama, make her stop!” May cried out, burying her face in Mother’s shoulder.

“Really, Glynis! Have you no sense at all? Why do you wish to upset your sister so?”

I bristled under my mother’s scolding as Father intoned, “There, there,” patting her hand to soothe her.

Instead of coddling May, as Mother was wont to do, I decided to irk them both even more. I was incredibly tired of the two of them being so decidedly female about the entire journey. So, I leaned even further out the window and flashed my mother a defiant smile.

“Glynis, pull your head back in here! I cannot believe your daughter, Edric!”

I realized that my mother’s Italian temper was about to get the best of her. As I did not wish her to scold Father for my disobedience, I sat back in my seat with a petulant sigh. Fluffing up my skirts, I perched primly and proceeded to glare at her.

“Do not look at me like that, young lady! If you had behaved yourself in Venezia, Roma, Firenze, and even in Paris, we would not have to be here now in this abominable place,” Mother scolded.

She had a point. The entire purpose of our travels abroad were to find suitable husbands for me and my dear sister May. Our English suitors found me far too outspoken and my sister far too passive. Plus, we were a bit too foreign

for many of the English aristocracy because of our Italian mother. Even her Medici lineage did not help us find favor amongst the nobility.

“I do not want a husband,” I responded coyly.

“Oh, really? And what is it that you want?”

“A series of young lovers.” There! I knew that would send her over the edge at me and spare Father her wrath.

Instead, Mother narrowed her eyes and turned her gaze sharply to my father. “Edric! See, do you see, what you have permitted?”

“She is trying to provoke you, dearest.”

I could not help, but smile. Father knew me so well. I was really quite bored and restless. And when I am bored and restless, I tend to behave rather badly.

“She is the way she is because of you!”

“Perhaps,” Father said. He tilted his head to regard me, smiling at me affectionately.

I mirrored his actions and relaxed slightly. Despite Mother’s constant chiding, I felt quite secure in who she was: my adoring, temperamental mother. And I knew that Father would always come to my defense. He adored my outspokenness as much as he did my mother’s. Many times he told me how like her I am, and that is why he did not want to change me. If he loved my mother for all her fiery temper, then some man would love me for the same reason.

“Look, Glynis. See those graves there at the crossroads. The peasants of this country believe if you bury criminals at the crossroads they will not be able to return from the dead.”

“Really?” I immediately leaned over to see, my eyes filled with morbid curiosity.

“Oh, how dreadful!” May gasped, looking even more pale than before.

“Do you see what you are doing, Edric? Again, you are only promoting her outlandishness. Why, why, Glynis can you not act like a proper young lady?”

“I do act like a proper young lady, Mother. Everyone adored me in Italy except for the men. It is my mouth that gets me into trouble. Remember? That is what you always remark.” I regarded her with wide, innocent eyes.

“That tongue of yours. Where did you get it?” Mother sighed, growing weary of the argument.

“I wonder,” Father said in a soft voice. A small smile played across his lips.

Mother looked piqued, then she relaxed and smiled. “I will say no more! We are all exhausted by this tedious journey. Let us think of more pleasant matters.”

“I feel so very sick.” May moaned as she tried to brace herself in the lurching carriage.

“We do seem to be traveling awfully fast,” Father decided. He unfastened the window beside him and slid it open. Leaning out of the carriage window, he shouted, “Ovidiu, why are we moving so rapidly?”

I could not hear the response over the rattling of the carriage, but when Father

sat back, his expression was one of bewilderment.

“What did he say?” Mother demanded.

“He said that the night is approaching and we must reach the village before darkness falls. Then he said the oddest thing.”

“Which was?” I asked.

“The dead travel fast,” Father answered in a mystified tone.

“Savages. They are all superstitious savages.” Mother sniffed, continuing to coddle May.

“And you want me to marry one,” I said.

“There, there, enough of that,” Father droned, his gaze a bit hazy as he pondered the meaning of Ovidiu’s words.

“I wish we would get to the village soon,” May said. “I feel so sick!”

“I hope we never get there,” I said with a pout.

“Please, Glynis, you must be kind to our host.” Mother reached out to me. “This man is a very respected member of Hungarian Society. Sir Stephen said he has had many dealings with the Count, and he has a very high opinion of him.”

“But we do not even know him! And I certainly do not remember meeting this Count at any of the dinner parties we attended!” I ignored my mother’s imploring hand and glared at her. I honestly did not recall meeting any such man at any of the events my parents had insisted we attend. Of course, I had deliberately avoided spending too much time with anyone who seemed sincerely interested in me.

I did remember one particular night when I had felt chills down my back and had known someone was watching me. I had never been able to figure out who it had been, but the experience had made me feel horribly uneasy. With my sort of luck, the unknown admirer was the man who had summoned my family to his estate high in the Carpathian Mountains. I was sure it was some disgusting old man who wanted nothing more than a nubile young body to satisfy his lascivious lust. Little did I realize how close to the mark I was in my ruminations...

Mother threw up her hands. “Edric, please deal with your daughter!”

Father reached over and pressed my hand firmly. “There, there, Glynis.”

I felt a hot anger welling up within me. I hated that my parents dared to believe they could just tell me who to marry and expect me to be agreeable! This Count was probably an ugly old man with no hair and bad teeth. I did not care to meet with this stranger that was so enamored with me. I had not liked his calligraphy: all loopy and fancy. And that ugly seal on the letter disgusted me. A dragon, of all things!

“You would be a Countess if you married this gentleman,” Mother said, attempting to pacify me.

I made a face and pointedly stared out the window at the winding road we were so precariously traveling. I found myself almost wishing we would fall off the mountain. Death must be a lovely, poetic thing. Angels would pluck my soul

from my shattered body and fly me up to Heaven. Yes, that would be better than marrying some old, bald, fat Count.

“You must be nice to the Count. You simply must be pleasant,” Mother said firmly. She sounded very desperate. “Please, my darling, please!”

“Glynis, do not aggravate your mother,” Father said.

The carriage lurched suddenly and the horses whinnied. I was pitched over into my mother, and we both fell to the floor as the carriage careened upwards off the road into the brush. We struggled back into our seats as the carriage continued to lurch about.

May swooned in our mother’s arms.

“Edric!” Mother clutched May tightly as we were swung about.

Father leaned out the window and shouted at the driver to stop. He was nearly jolted right out the window by the wild shimmy of the carriage.

I braced myself as well as I could as I wondered if my hasty death wish was about to come true. I was not so certain that I wanted to die in this strange land.

Abruptly, our steep ascent ceased, and we were all tossed into a heap on the floor.

Father thrust the door open and hopped out of the still rocking carriage.

In a loud voice, he demanded, “What in God’s name is going on?”

Our guide, Ovidiu, and the driver were already speaking anxiously in their native language, gesturing wildly.

“Good God, man, did you hear me? What is happening?”

I stumbled out of the carriage and stood next to my father, shaken and tucking my curls under my bonnet.

The swarthy Transylvanian guide dropped down next to Father. His dark eyes looked almost crazed with fear. “The pass to the village has been cut off. There was a big storm. It blew down many large rocks and blocked the way. The only other road leads up into the mountains.”

“Will it take us to the village? We have a very important connection to make there,” Father said impatiently.

“It is a dangerous road. Very dangerous.” Ovidiu looked as if he were about to sit down on the ground and cry.

“We have no choice. Take the high road to the village,” Father ordered.

While they spoke I was studying the road intently. The carriage was a little beyond the break in the road. The lower road obviously led toward the small village where we were due to arrive that night. The carriage had skidded when the driver abruptly reined the horses up onto the high road, crashing through the foliage.

“It is a dangerous way!” Ovidiu shook his head. “Too dangerous to go that way!”

“Father, where did the boulders come from? Not off this road.” I stared down at the strange barricade. “It is as if they were set there.”

Father was irritated with our guide. He was a man who expected to be obeyed without question. "It is dangerous, but it is also the only road open to our destination. We are expecting a carriage to pick us up tomorrow in the village of Rosu. We must be there tonight!"

"Night will come fast now. The sun is low," Ovidiu said. His anxious dark eyes darted toward the descending sun.

"Yes, yes. Light the lanterns on the carriage. Let us be off. We are wasting time!"

I reached out to Father. I was very bothered by the way the road was blocked. It seemed so deliberate. "The boulders, Father--"

"It is a dangerous way!" Ovidiu looked stricken. "We can turn back now! We can be far away by the time the moon is full!"

"Stuff and nonsense, Ovidiu. Light the lanterns and let us be off!" Father motioned at the driver that we were continuing on this high road.

"Father!"

"What is it, Glynis?"

"The boulders down there--"

"Yes, yes, what of them?" Father glanced down through the trees at the barrier blocking the lower road.

"Where did they come from?"

"We are in the mountains, Glynis. There are rocks of all shapes and sizes about. Now, into the carriage with you."

"But, it is so odd, Father!"

"This is an odd country, Glynis."

I was ushered up into the carriage and seated reluctantly across from my mother.

"It was as if they were placed there, Father. Do you not think it is odd? Maybe it is a sign."

Mother held May close as she tried to soothe my panicked sister. "What is a sign?"

"The road being blocked. Maybe God does not want me to go see the Count. Maybe God has blocked our way as a sign to us," I answered. I did not truly believe my words, but I dreaded continuing on with our journey.

"This is 1819. I think we are far beyond believing in signs," Father declared as he took his seat. He swung the door shut and knocked on the side of the carriage with his fist.

The carriage lurched forward, and we began our ascent into the darkening forest.

As the sun continued its journey downwards, dark shadows began to fill the valleys. I sat quietly pondering the strange configuration of large boulders that blocked our passage. May finally stopped whimpering and fell asleep in our mother's arms. Father seemed lost in the wilderness of his own mind, staring

blindly out the window. Silence filled our tiny haven.

The climb was treacherous, but as the sun continued to sink below the craggy mountaintops, the horses raced on more swiftly than before. We were rattled about the carriage with every curve in the road .

I could feel the urgency in the driver's voice as he prodded the horses to greater momentum. The rumble of thunder could be heard rolling through the mountains as foreboding dark clouds rolled overhead obscuring the starry sky. The sun vanished with one last glimmer through the pine trees, then night took possession of the earth.

As the sky transformed from light to dark, so did our mood. The day had been drenched with refreshing sunlight. The night was darker than any I could recall, the air stifling. I felt as though I could not even take a full breath. The darkness filling the carriage smothered me.

Strangely, my family also seemed to sense the change. We fell into an eerie silence. Mother's mouth was clamped so tightly shut that her lips were as pale as the moon she so warily regarded.

"What was that?" May whispered.

"The neighing of the horses," Father said, his voice slicing harshly through the darkness.

A sharp yelp ripped out of the night.

"Father, I heard something, too!" I gripped his arm tightly.

It was then that Ovidiu began to call out shrilly. Even though it was in another language, I could have sworn his words were the Lord's Prayer. As I heard the deep voice of the driver join in, I glanced with worry at my father.

"Father, what did the driver say earlier?"

"Glynis!" Mother's voice was a hiss.

"The dead travel fast," my father answered. His uneasiness was very evident in his voice.

I shivered at the thought. It was horribly morbid. Yet, somehow, fascinating. We were in such an exotic country with odd customs far removed from prim English society. I could only imagine what the driver had meant. Boldly, I leaned out the window.

The cold wind tugged at my hair and clothes, nipping at my nose. Ahead of the carriage, the road twisted among the trees. I turned my gaze and immediately let out a small gasp.

Three wolves, two dark gray, one white as the moonlight, were racing behind the carriage. The wolves' eyes seemed to flash with red fire. Their strong legs appeared to carry them on the wind itself. I could have sworn their great paws never touched the ground.

The white wolf gazed directly into my eyes. For a moment, a cold, tight hand of fear gripped my body. Then the three wolves veered off the road and disappeared into the forest.

I practically fell back into my seat, breathless with excitement. “There were wolves out there! Following us! It was most peculiar!”

“What? Wolves?” Mother let out a little gasp.

“Yes, wolves! There were three wolves running behind us,” I said. My eyes must have been very bright. “They were beautiful!”

“Nonsense! The night is playing tricks on your mind!” Mother cast a fearful look toward the windows.

“Truly I saw them! They were rushing along behind us!”

May whimpered in fear and clutched Mother’s arm.

“Edric, she is frightening her sister. Make her stop!”

Father patted my arm lightly. “Be kind to your sister.”

I frowned, then turned my gaze sharply out the window. Damn them all! They never believed me. I was not fanciful. I was merely much more observant than any of them cared to be.

I felt the presence of the night all about me: a living, breathing entity, whispering soft words against my flesh. I had never before felt the silken touch of the night caress me as I did now. It was a frightening, yet exhilarating experience. It was as if the night itself were attempting to seduce me.

As the horses’ hooves thundered and the night sky rumbled, all those within the frail carriage cowered except for me. Instead of feeling terror, I felt very much alive. I leaned out into the darkness beyond the carriage once more; my hands gripping the window frame as the cold wind pressed stinging kisses against my cheeks.

“Glynis! Sit back!”

I pointedly ignored my mother and watched as the forest began to thin. I could see the dark impression of the valley beneath us. For an instant, I thought I saw a flash of white. I strained to see and witnessed a glimmer of something pale racing through the trees. It had to be the ivory wolf.

“Let me see you, please,” I called out, not truly understanding the meaning of my words.

“I am here,” the wind seemed to answer me, and I felt quite mad.

I saw a woman standing next to the road. A beautiful woman with her long blond hair and white gown billowing on the wind. The carriage sped past the apparition, and, impulsively, I stretched out my hand. To my surprise, the ghostly woman reached out as well, and our fingertips touched.

With a gasp, I plunged my frozen finger into my mouth.

The carriage lurched unexpectedly as the forest disappeared. I found myself staring down into a dark chasm. Glancing ahead, I saw the road was leading directly to a great castle resting on the edge of a precipice.

“There is a castle ahead!”

“A castle!” Mother forgot herself, leaning her head out of the window. “Thank God!”

The horses began to whinny and the carriage lurched. The driver was trying to pull up on the reins to stop the carriage before it reached the vast courtyard of the castle.

“Good God, Ovidiu! Do not stop them! There is shelter,” Father shouted out.

Whatever the two frightened Transylvanians were attempting failed as the horses resisted. The carriage careened into the courtyard despite the efforts of the driver. Snorting and neighing, the horses clattered to a stop.

“At last! Shelter!” Mother snuggled her frightened youngest daughter to her body. “It is shelter, my darling May.”

“Thank goodness, Mama. I was so frightened!”

I cast an annoyed glance at them, then stared out the window at the imposing castle. It had obviously fallen into disuse, and I doubted anyone should live within its walls. Its craggy exterior bid no welcome. I thought I saw a light above me. Glancing up, I saw a face peering down at me from one of the long narrow topmost windows. But as the clouds slipped over the full moon, the face vanished.

Ovidiu whipped the door open and stared at us with horrified eyes. “We cannot stay here! We must leave!”

“Do not be ridiculous. We must consult with the master of this castle.” Father climbed down and straightened his coat. “We must take care of the women.” He stood on the ruined steps of the entrance, looking about at his dreary surroundings. He seemed not very encouraged by the sorry state of this gruesome castle, but he did have us to consider. He attempted to straighten his clothes and smooth his mussed graying red hair with his hands. Resolute, he marched up to the great ancient door of the castle, and then he hesitated.

Peering out at my father, I thought I saw his demeanor change for a moment. He glanced back at me with the strangest look. I thought I saw fear in his eyes, then he regained his composure, rapped on the door and waited.

“Please, sir, please, let us leave this place,” Ovidiu said piteously. He fearfully gazed at the door and clutched his hand to his heart.

The door opened and light spilled out of the doorway. A man appeared carrying a lantern. He carried it low at his side and I could not make out his face.

“I’m sorry to disturb you-“ Father began.

“Earl Wright, this is most certainly a surprise. I did not expect you until tomorrow.” The voice coming from the stranger was low, seductive and powerful. It carried the accent of the country, and it chilled me to the bone.

“It is the Count!” Mother smiled with relief, laying her hand over her heart. “All is well!”

I glanced over at Ovidiu. The man was gesturing anxiously, looking more than a little afraid. I had the feeling that all was not as well as Mother thought.

“I am surprised you found my home.”

Father looked too startled to respond. “Yes, err, um...”

The Count moved toward the carriage. "I take it this is your lovely family, Earl Wright."

"Yes, yes! We are all here per your kind invitation, sir. We did not expect to find your castle. It was quite by accident."

"A most delightful accident! But rest assured, many strange things happen on nights such as these in this country." The Count reached the doorway of the carriage and lifted his lantern. His green eyes came sharply into focus and he stared directly at me. "Do they not, Lady Glynis?"

"I suppose," I answered. I felt unnerved by this man. I could feel his aura of power pressing against me, and I shivered under his gaze.

The Count smiled with his sensuous lips, his eyes burning into mine. "Oh, I assure you they do. And welcome to my home. I am Dracula."

Chapter 2

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright - Continued

As I stared into the face of Count Dracula, I felt a fear so chilling my body began to tremble. His face was long with strong cheekbones and an aquiline nose. Soft, sensuous lips were smiling at me from beneath a thick mustache, and long auburn hair fell over his shoulders to his trim waist. He was staring at my face with such intensity I could not even begin to imagine his thoughts.

"Count Dracula, we are most pleased to make your acquaintance," Mother said.

"I'm not truly a Count, my lady," he said. Finally, he turned his gaze away from me, directing it at her. "I am Prince Vlad Dracula. They call me a Count because my family no longer rules this country. But I am truly a Prince." He moved back and extended his hand to Mother. His hands were long and strong, his nails unusually long in length.

Mother took his hand a little nervously and was helped out of the carriage.

"He is so very handsome," May whispered to me.

"In his way." I was still struggling to regain my composure. I felt so cold, so very weak.

Prince Vlad helped May down, then extended his hand to me. As I looked upon his face, I could feel the strength of his gaze. He was a man of great power. He was nothing like the old bald Count I had imagined. I felt drawn to him, yet repulsed. Swallowing hard, I slipped my hand into his. His hand was cold and dry. As he pulled me toward him, he suddenly smiled. I thought I saw, for a mere moment, long wolf-like fangs beyond his red lips. I tried to draw my hand away, but he held it firmly.

"Don't fret, Lady Glynis," he said softly. "All is as it should be."

As my feet touched the cold stones, I pulled away, moving swiftly to my

father's side. Keeping my head down, I tried to avoid Prince Vlad's potent gaze. He unnerved me, making me feel weak, and I despised him for it.

Vlad stepped into the doorway, turning toward us. "Enter my house, my dear friends. Enter freely of your own will. Bring me a measure of your happiness. Please, enter!"

Father escorted my mother into the great hall beyond the door as we, his faithful daughters, timidly followed.

Vlad turned his gaze toward the driver and Ovidiu. "You, there! I suggest you take the horses to the stables. If you sleep there, I promise you safety this night."

Ovidiu seemed on the verge of collapse. The driver cowered behind the horses. Both were staring at Vlad as if he were Satan himself. At Vlad's words, both visibly relaxed.

"Thank you, kind master! Thank you!" Ovidiu exclaimed.

Prince Vlad nodded once, then closed the door. The sound of it slamming shut echoed through the castle. Turning, Vlad smiled at us as we huddled together. "I am afraid I am not quite as prepared as I should wish to be. I am in the midst of repairing the castle. It is a difficult task that I take to with great pride. The Draculas were a great ruling family. Ilona!"

A small, old gypsy woman appeared out of the shadows carrying a lantern.

"Prepare the rooms immediately."

Ilona glanced at me, her dark eyes very alert and hard. She nodded quickly, then shuffled off into the dark.

"I have hired the local gypsies as servants. They are not as gifted in their tasks as the servants you are accustomed to, but they perform adequately."

"Of course." Father was at a loss for words.

I could not blame him.

The long corridor that lay before us was cold and decrepit. I could see that he was beginning to question his desire to seek shelter in this place.

Vlad laughed, amused by our expressions. "I must explain, my friends. I do not plan to live here much longer. I am planning to move to England. I wish to invest in an estate there. I plan to marry and live there with my family. This castle is to be sort of a vacation home. I also have a home in Buda. A lovely home. That is where I was staying when I was unexpectedly called back here."

"Oh! I see," Mother said with relief.

"Several areas of the castle are repaired and quite hospitable. Come, come. There is a delicious supper waiting for you." Prince Vlad moved down the hall, holding the lantern high over his head.

I followed behind the rest of my family, wishing to place as much room as possible between Prince Vlad and me. He was not the old, bald, fat Count of my imaginings, but I almost wished he were. He was darkly handsome, alluring, frightening and, I feared, somehow evil.

As I climbed a great staircase, I observed how precisely he carried himself. He was a tall, lean man with broad shoulders. He looked like a warrior.

I heard whispering behind me and whirled about. I stared into the darkness and saw no one lingering in the shadows. Yet, I sensed that someone was watching me. Nervously, I caught up with my family.

Vlad threw open a set of doors and light flooded out. Before us was a vast dining room. It was quite nice and warm. A large meal was already on the table and two young gypsy women were finishing laying the table.

I looked suspiciously at Vlad and said quite boldly, "I thought you said you weren't expecting us."

"I wasn't, dear lady." Prince Vlad moved on to speak with my father, coolly dismissing my comment.

"Please, Glynis, be kind to our host," Mother begged me under her breath. She tucked her hair back from her face, then tried to smooth out her very rumpled skirt. May hovered at Mother's elbow, looking around with wide eyes.

"I don't like this place," I said with a sniff.

"Neither do I. It's so ghastly!" May continued to look about the room warily.

"Well, he said he has another home," Mother said. She also seemed a little disturbed by our surroundings.

"Then why didn't he entertain us there?"

Mother, looking tired, gave me a sharp look. "Be polite, my darling. He is a handsome man with foreign ways. He obviously likes you." She took a deep breath. "Perhaps he is too obvious in showing his interest, but..." Mother faltered, shaking her head slightly.

I took heart from this gesture. I leaned close to my mother, studying her face. "You don't like him either, do you?"

"I don't know."

"You don't like him, do you, Mother?" I was quite insistent.

Mother laid a soft hand against my flushed cheek. "Something is not right here. I will talk to your father tonight."

I hugged my mother impulsively. "Oh, Mama, thank you!"

She gently pushed me away. "I want you to marry, but not this badly. I suspect there is no house in Buda."

"Oh, but there is," Prince Vlad said from across the room. He had been speaking in low tones with Father.

We turned toward him, surprised, May clinging to Mother's arm. Mother was so startled, she could not respond.

"There is a house in Buda. I really do intend, dear lady, to move to London. My time here is drawing to an end." Vlad motioned to the table. "Please eat."

I managed to consume a portion of the meal served to me despite the fact that Prince Vlad's gaze hardly ever strayed from me. I also found it to be very peculiar that he did not eat a bite of the food. The Prince seemed intent on

impressing my parents and engaged them in a long conversation about our journey across the Continent. I could not read my father's expression. He was more stoic than ever. What was even more surprising was that Mother was unusually subdued. I had never seen her so passive. Both of my parents answered the Prince's questions politely, but simply.

May, meanwhile, stared at Prince Vlad with her large doe eyes, completely transfixed by his odd ways. I frowned at her, stabbing irritably at my roasted meat. It was far too spicy for my taste.

"Did you enjoy your time in Italy?"

I glanced down the table at the Prince, tilting my head slightly, trying to avoid his direct gaze. "It was lovely. I enjoyed it immensely. I hope to return to live there." I narrowed my eyes just a bit, then turned my gaze back to my plate, clearly dismissing him.

The Prince laughed with amusement. "I see. I desire to visit Italy in the near future. I hear it is breathtakingly beautiful." His gaze rested on me, as if drinking in my loveliness. "Perhaps we will go there together."

My Mother faked a small cough while Father looked on blandly.

"Mama, I'm rather tired," May said plaintively.

"I am miserably tired as well," I said.

I wanted to be away from this awful room, the strange food, and the intriguing, yet repellent Prince. I felt out of sorts and very peculiar. It was as if my body was cringing inward on itself, yet strangely stimulated. Part of me wanted to stare deep into the Prince's eyes and ask him all sorts of fanciful questions about his peculiar kingdom while another aspect wished only to flee. Despite my absolute dislike for the man, he intrigued me.

"We had best retire, Edric," Mother said. She glanced briefly at Vlad, as if wary of him.

"Yes, the journey must have been very long. You should rest. Forgive me for keeping you so long!" Prince Vlad stood up and moved to my chair.

I pouted slightly. He seemed far too anxious for me to retire. As he slid back my chair, I stood up, quickly stepping far to one side. Father placed a gentle hand on my shoulder, and I sank back against him gratefully. Prince Vlad just smiled slightly, inclined his head, then moved to help May to her feet. Mother instantly hurried to May's side and pretended to fuss over her.

"Are you well? Do you feel feverish?"

Again, Prince Vlad seemed amused at the protectiveness of our parents. I met his gaze defiantly. Something unspoken and dangerous passed between us.

Vlad motioned to the two gypsy women that had served dinner. "Take them to their rooms. My dear guests, your luggage awaits you. I trust you will sleep well. I hope the approaching storm does not disrupt your slumber. I, too, shall now retire. I shall see you in the morning. There will be much to discuss."

Vlad took Mother's hand, kissing it lightly, then May's, and then, of course,

mine. I was repulsed at how cold his fingers were, how dry. I forced myself to let him draw my knuckles to his mouth. His lips lingered on my hand for far too long, and Mother made a noise in her throat. With a charming smile, he released my hand, stepping back.

“I wish you all a very good night,” he said. He flashed one last smile, then strode from the banquet hall.

Mother gave Father a sharp look. He gently took her hand, motioning to the gypsy women with his eyes. We all understood and quietly filed out after them. I was first in line, and followed the strange, dark women up a flight of stairs, my family trailing behind me. I could hear my parents whispering softly, and I strained to hear them. I distinctly heard father call Vlad “an odd fish” and my mother’s quiet declaration of “He’s just not right.” I couldn’t help, but smile. I was confident that they would not leave me in this abominable place. In fact, I was quite certain that we would be leaving in the morning. I hoped we would start the journey back across the Continent to England.

The gypsies opened doors for my parents, then May, who did not want to sleep alone. I was not about to put up with her snores all night.

“Please, Glynis, let me sleep with you,” she whispered softly, her eyes pleading.

“Oh, please, May, what are you afraid of? Ghosts?”

She clutched her bonnet to her chest tightly, gazing into the candlelit room that had been prepared for her. When her gaze returned to me, I could see the fear in her eyes. “Yes, yes, I am.”

I felt rather bad for her, but I just could not stand a night of her snores and thrashing about. Taking hold of her hand, I kissed her cheek softly. “Don’t fear, little sister, there is nothing here that can hurt you.”

She looked at me hopefully. “Do you really believe that? You are not afraid?”

With a wild laugh, I twirled away from her down the shadowy hallway. “Of course not.”

The two gypsy women exchanged furtive glances, and I caught their dark expressions out of the corner of my eye. I gave them a sharp look, warning them to keep silent, then rushed back to shower May with kisses as I pressed her firmly into her room.

“Tomorrow will be a grand day. Now rest up!”

I made a great show of blowing her kisses, then shut the door firmly. I shall never forget the expression on her delicate face. She was afraid. Later, I realized she was afraid for me.

“Now, don’t you go frightening my sister with heathen concepts of ghosts and other horrible creatures,” I said to the gypsy women.

One laughed softly as the other crossed herself.

“There is more in this world than you English know,” the somber one said,

brushing past me.

The chortling gypsy followed, holding her lantern high.

I frowned, following, quite perturbed by their behavior. There was a certain part of me that was quite taken with the castle. It seemed like the dreary, gloomy setting of a gothic romance that was found in the sensationalistic penny dreadfuls. I could easily imagine all sorts of ungodly creatures roaming the shrouded hallways and lurking in the darkened doorways.

I shivered as my thoughts strayed to the Prince.

No, the true danger was the Prince. The way he had gazed at me had unnerved me. I had had a few men look upon me with desire before. I could tell they were wondering what the caress of my lips would feel like against theirs. However, I was certain the Prince had been imagining something much more lascivious.

I noticed that the gypsies were guiding me deeper into the castle, leaving my family far down the hall.

“Why is my room so far away from my family?”

“Many of the rooms are not very good. We are giving you the nicest room,” one gypsy woman said as she opened a door for me.

The spacious room was fairly clean, but smelled odd. There was a large bed with beautiful, rich bedclothes that were showing their great age, and I wrinkled my nose with distaste. My luggage was already open, and a nightgown was laid out for me on the turned down covers.

I frowned. “This is the nicest room?”

Disregarding my rather rude question, they shut the door solidly behind me.

This was such a horrid place. Yes, the décor was ornate, but it was so old. So worn. So ancient.

In the corner, steam rose from a small basin set out so I could freshen up. I quickly discarded my traveling clothes, washed my face and limbs, and changed into the nightgown. I longed for a proper bath, but that did not seem likely. After making sure that the shutters were drawn tight over the windows, I climbed reluctantly into the musty bed. I snuggled down under the cover, attempting to relax.

The wind sang outside the window and thunder boomed in the distance. Faintly, I thought I heard wolves howling. Except for the fire raging in the fireplace across the room, there was nothing to give me comfort.

I thought of ghosts and goblins, entertaining a moment of fear, but then I laughed aloud at the ridiculous concept. As I did every night, I said my prayers and settled down to sleep.

Again, I thought I heard whispers just beyond the edge of my hearing. My eyes snapped open, and I glanced about the room. It was empty, yet I could still hear the hushed voices.

“Who is there?”

There was no direct answer to my question, but the voices continued to linger just on the edge of my hearing.

I sat up and glared at the doorway. “Who is at my door?”

Slowly, I came to realize that the whispers were all around me. Leaping from the bed, I began to feverishly look about for any source of the odd phenomenon. Try as I may, I could not fully hear the voices that were taunting me, or find their origin.

“I must be mad,” I said aloud.

Shaking my head, my long hair falling around my shoulders, I put a hand to my face. As I listened, the soft whispers faded away. Eventually, I began to believe I had imagined the entire incident.

Weary from the journey, disturbed by my own hallucinations, I climbed back into the bed. Exhaustion must be playing with my mind, I thought.

Soon, sleep claimed me, and I fell into a restless slumber.

As I lay there in the great bed, in this old dark castle, I dreamed the strangest dream. Prince Vlad rose up beside the bed, standing over me, his chest bare, and his auburn hair falling to his waist. A strange pendant hung against his muscled chest. It was a golden dragon.

And in this strange dream, he leaned over me, gazing upon me. He ran his hands over my long red tresses, letting my curls wrap around his fingers.

“Yes, my dearest Glynis, you are the one.”

And in this dream, that frightened and aroused me, his hands slid over me, slowly drawing down the bedclothes. Moving onto the bed, he knelt over me, reaching down to stroke my face with his cold fingertips. Sliding a hand under my neck, he lifted me toward him, my hands falling helplessly to my sides.

Slowly, his other hand dipped seductively into my nightgown, resting over my beating heart.

In my dream state, I could feel my heart beginning to beat harshly, and I strained to fully open my eyes. My body was on fire beneath his touch.

Desire in his eyes, he leaned over, breathing in my breath.

I swooned, my face falling away from him, exposing my throat. I wanted to scream and thrash about, but my body betrayed me.

And in this nightmare, this odd dream of mine, he licked my throat with his long tongue, a gesture of a dark promise of what was to come.

“Soon,” he said.

A deep moan broke forth from my own lips, wakening me.

I sat upright and looked about quite anxiously. The bed was empty save for me. The bedclothes were tossed about and hanging partially off the bed. My hand flew to my throat and it felt damp to my touch. My entire body was heaving. My nightgown fell loosely over one shoulder, exposing one breast. I quickly covered it, irrationally fearing it would somehow be seen.

The dream still clung to me as I slipped off the bed. Still trembling from the throes of the nightmare, I moved about the room, looking into every darkened corner, and behind every piece of furniture. I fancied I would find the Prince hiding there, waiting to ravish me once more in my sleep, but he was no where to be found.

I was quite alone.

The room was empty.

The Prince did not dwell in the shadows.

I was alone.

Heart thudding, I forced myself to take refuge under the covers.

Sleep took long in returning.

Chapter 3

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright - Continued

I was already lying awake staring into the shadows when morning came. The storm had disappeared during the night. The breeze wafting through the window I had opened shortly after awakening was cool and fresh. I slipped from the bed and moved toward the window, desperate to see the sun. I had craved the warmth and light of the morning sun in hopes that it would chase away the wraiths of the night. When it finally spilled over the horizon, the light felt cold and harsh, and I shrank back from the window. A chill fluttered over my skin, and I drew my robe tightly around me. The nightmares seemed far away, yet I was still unnerved. The power of their intensity lingered within me.

Though this foreign land was beautiful, it frightened me. Its hidden supernatural pulse beat loudly in my ears, and I could taste it on my tongue. I felt quite irrational and foolish after the harrowing night in the forsaken castle. I felt I had been claimed in that strange, terrible dream.

There was a sharp rap on the door, then my mother's voice called out, "Glynis, darling, let me in."

I rushed over and quickly drew back the bolt. As I flung back the door, I found myself confronted by my pensive mother. She was dressed immaculately and looked lovely despite the frown upon her forehead.

"Glynis, what is it? You are so pale!" She rushed into the room and gathered me to her.

"I had the most hideous night," I cried out.

Taking my hands in hers, she drew me to the window, staring at my face, my neck and then, to my surprise, my body. "No one disturbed you? You are unmolested?"

"No, of course not," I said, but I found myself wanting to hide from her gaze.

I felt quite unlike myself as I drew away from her, glancing warily toward the bed.

“Glynis, are you sure?”

I shook my head and forced a laugh. “I suppose I am acting rather odd. I just did not sleep well, Mama. I just - it was the wind. It seemed to sound like voices at times.”

My mother hesitated, then nodded. “Yes, and so it seemed to me as well, as if the very night was whispering at the window. But of course, that was just nonsense.” Despite her words, I could see she was unnerved and she touched the cross around her neck lightly.

“Perhaps, but I did have horrible dreams. They were quite disturbing and unchristian in every way. I think it is this horrible place.”

My mother sighed and began to fuss with my hair. Her eyes revealed her own restless sleep. Dressed elegantly in blue, she looked very out of place in this strange grotesque castle.

“I had nightmares as well. It is just that this country is so wild. So foreign. They were just dreams, that is all. Now get dressed.”

I tossed my curls at her, feeling rather contrary and moody this morning. I was upset that she did not appreciate how much my nightmares had frightened me.

“But, Mama-”

“Come now, we must get you ready for the day. Enough of our delusions.” My mother waved her hands as if to sweep the memories of our disturbing night away.

I flung myself onto the bed dramatically. “I do not wish to dress! I had the most horrible night!”

“The night is behind us.” She appeared relieved that I had not been ravished by our host and determined that we should put the terrible night behind us.

I curled up in the corner of the bed and wrinkled my nose as she held up a peach colored gown. “It was dreadful! And so is that dress!”

“Really, Glynis, must you be so difficult so soon in the morning?”

“I hate that dress!”

“It is a lovely gown. Do not be spiteful.” She held up the gown that she had insisted we purchase in Paris and waved it about.

“I did not like when we bought it. I do not like it now.” I tossed my curls and fussed with my robe. I was tired from the events of the night and rather perturbed that my Mother dismissed my trauma. My fear and emptiness of the earlier hours gave way to a nice rush of indignant anger.

I pouted at her, and she ignored me.

“Well, it looks rather sweet on you even if you are not.” My mother set her lips and gave me the look I could not bring myself to defy.

As she helped me dress, I grumbled.

“Oh, to be home, with proper servants,” she said.

“I rather miss Midge and Gretchen.” They had tended to the Wright children all of our lives. I had a fond spot for both of them.

“Yes, I miss all of them. It is too tiring trying to look after both you and May. Your sister barely slept last night and kept falling asleep when I was fixing her hair.” I caught the look of disdain on her face. “It is this dreadful place.”

“Then we are leaving soon!”

“Perhaps.”

“What do you mean?”

“Glynis, my darling, we must act like proper guests.”

“I do not want to!”

“But you must.”

“Why must I always do what I wish not to do?”

“Glynis, my most difficult child, every woman must do what she does not wish to do.”

“That’s nonsense. I do not like it. I do not see why we must always bow to the rules of society or our husbands!”

“That is because you are young and foolish.”

I tried to turn to protest, but she firmly turned me away and went back to work on fastening me into my dress.

“I am not foolish,” I countered.

“I beg to differ, my darling one. You always rush ahead without a thought. You seem determined to shock us all with your behavior. It is time for you to learn that life is not the games of your childhood, and you must mature into a fine young lady ready for marriage and a family.”

“I will not marry this horrible count!”

She fluffed my sleeves and fastened upon me the most stern of glares. “Glynis, your father told me last night that Sir Stephen has only the highest praises for our host. It is only right and proper that we allow our dear host to show us all he can offer to you.”

“In other words, as long as he is rich and well-titled, he is a good husband.” I stomped my foot. “I will not marry that terrible man. He even haunted my dreams!”

My mother took hold of my arms, her fingers digging into my soft flesh. “You will act like a proper young lady when he is with you. I will have none of this behavior. He is a prince. A respected man, I am told, in this country.”

“But not in England? Is that not what you wanted? A husband with standing in society? So I would not be the outcast you were!”

I instantly regretted my words. I could tell they stung her. It had never been easy for her being a foreigner in British society. She was dark and exotic compared to the fine ladies of the aristocracy. Wild and foreign, many sniffed. I might as well have slapped her.

“I want the best for you. Is that so wrong?” Her voice trembled with a mixture of emotions. She drew away from me, her slim body tense. “You are my daughter. My blood! I want you to marry well and have children.”

“But what if I do not want that?” I could not help myself. I truly could not. I wanted her to understand that my needs were not what she thought them to be. I wanted to be free of the society she had tried so hard to be part of.

She threw up her hands. “I do not know what to do anymore, Glynis. I want you to be married, taken care of, and respected. But you have fought your father and me ever since we began our travels. This may be your last chance to find a proper husband. Last night I was overcome with the journey and the storm. I realize I must at least consider Prince Vlad and treat him with the respect he deserves.”

“Then you consider him, but I will not.” I stomped my foot for good measure, turning my back on her.

“Darling, does this castle seem so horrible to you in the light of day? Yes, there are areas in desperate need of repair, but what has been restored is quite pleasant. It will one day be a lovely home.”

“It’s horrible and I hate it!” I ran to the window and stared out at the broken battlements of the ancient castle. “Look at this place! It is horrible! How could you wish me to stay in such a place?”

My mother clasped her hands tightly. “Please, Glynis, you must be kind. You must be respectful and you must act as a lady. I insist on it. As your mother, I insist.”

I whirled about and said, desperately, “How can you wish this of me?”

“The Prince has already decided to live in England. You would be a princess should your father agree to a marriage contract.”

“That is little consolation when faced with the fact that I cannot marry who I wish! If I choose to marry!”

“What other life would you live? Do you wish to be an old woman with no children to comfort her at the end of her life?”

I was going to be rather rude and tell her I had no need for human spawn, but my eyes fell on her face and my words died. I could see fear mixed with some darker emotion in her eyes. She abruptly let go of my arm and turned away from me, fastening her eyes on the wondrous beauty of the landscape beyond my windows.

I tried to relax and force my anger from my face. I really did not like making my mother angry.

“Are you so desperate to have me married?”

My mother surprised me by throwing her hands over her face as she sobbed, “Yes!”

I instinctively reached out and laid my hands over hers. “Please do not cry!”

“What do you expect me to do? When all I desire is for you to have a good

life and you fight me!”

I began to protest that I was not as difficult as she said when the door opened. My father entered the room and smiled grandly at us. Either he did not see the tears on my mother’s face or he deliberately ignored them. He, too, looked tired, but he smiled at me fondly.

Mother quickly wiped away her tears and greeted him with a loving smile.

“How lovely you both look this morning.” He ignored our flushed faces and kissed us both on the cheek. “Now, what were we speaking of?”

“Nothing at all,” my mother answered him.

Turning from him, I strode to the window across the ancient stone floor. I did not like this place, and I would not stay. In all honesty, if I had my way, I would never marry. Instead, I would be the mistress of someone exotic, like Lord Byron. I had met him once and he was quite charming. Of course, if my mother knew that I had chatted with him she would never allow me out of her sight again.

“Really? It did seem there was a discussion in progress,” my father said.

“It was most likely Glynis having a tantrum,” my sister said from the doorway.

“Ah, I see,” my father said, giving me a slight smile.

May stood pale and slight in the corridor. Her fair hair was piled on her head and she looked her usual delicate self. I had a mad moment where I actually considered pinching her to see if she was alive.

“Oh Glynis, I could not sleep a wink,” she said. “I kept hearing these strange whispers in my room.”

I have to admit by this point I was feeling quite contrary and disagreeable. I pretended to look worried.

“Really? It sounds as though you might be mad! The journey has driven you to insanity perhaps.”

May’s eyes widened. “Do you really think so?”

I giggled at her innocence, relented, and kissed her cheek. “Of course not! Don’t be silly.”

My family found our way to the dining room, May and I following our father and mother like dutiful daughters. I have to admit I appeared quite pleasant, but I was already planning what to say to the Prince to shock him horribly so he would cast us out. In the dining room, several gypsy women were setting the table while the old woman named Ilona looked after them. She seemed to sense our presence and turned toward us with a toothy smile.

“Ah, come in, come in!”

“How is Prince Vlad this morning?” My father gave me a warning glance and commenced into the dining room.

“He was called away quite early this morning on business. He assured me he would return tonight.” The old gypsy woman motioned to a chair. “Please sit

down. Eat! He wishes for you to relax and enjoy his hospitality.”

“Damn,” I whispered under my breath and watched May’s eyes widen. I smiled at her slightly, then flopped onto a chair. I was not sure what I would have said to the Prince over breakfast, but I was quite sure I could have thought of something quite horrible.

Breakfast was extremely boring. Father was obviously disappointed that our host had departed for the day and he kept muttering this under his breath. Mother lectured me endlessly about proper etiquette and how to be a proper young lady. All the while, May sat picking at her breakfast, staring warily up at the paintings hanging on the walls. I sat primly in my chair and tried to look as bored as possible as my mother droned on and on.

As soon as we could, I escaped with May into the castle on an exploring expedition. May was surprised to be invited, and I felt badly for leaving her out of my recent adventures. I was used to her declining to rush off on some half-conceived notion of mine. I thought she looked particularly miserable this morning, so I asked her along. Surprisingly, she said yes.

With an admonition to be careful from our father ringing in our ears, we began to explore the decrepit, yet fascinating castle.

“Isn’t it terrible that we are doing this, Glynis? The Prince should be the one to show us his home,” May whispered as we peered down a long hallway.

Now that I was away from my mother, I was in better spirits. No more talk of marriage for a few hours and I might actually behave myself. Well, probably not, but it was refreshing to be away from the constant lectures.

“Oh, please! Come on, May! Have fun for once without worrying. Besides, if I am forced to marry the Prince, this is going to be my castle.” I made a face at the thought. “Isn’t that ghastly to think about?”

“Oh, Glynis!” May giggled. “You would not stay here. He said he wants to move to England. Perhaps he could have a grand estate there. And I could marry a nice gentlemen and live nearby.”

“I’d rather not.”

“But why not?”

“I do not want to marry him.” I pushed another door open and stared into a small sitting room.

“Well, he is rather foreign and exotic---“

“No, that is not it. I do not want to marry anyone.”

“Does this have to do with Lord Byron again? Because, if mother ever found out that you met him, she would have you locked away. She always says he is a devil.”

“Well,” I conceded, “he was a bit of that. But he told me the loveliest poem though. I wish I could remember it.”

“You do not want to be a wanton woman. You just want to be a man.”

“Well, I want to be a woman who lives her life as a man. With no constraints.”

Being able to do as I please. I do not understand why they can do as they wish and we cannot. Just because we have breasts...”

“And they have that--” May widened her eyes, leaning forward “-you know... they have...”

I screwed up my face in distaste, and we both burst into wild laughter.

Grabbing each other’s hands, we rushed deeper into the castle.

A bit later, May wandered ahead and came across a staircase descending down into the ground. Her face shadowed with fear.

“What is it?”

“It just looks so old, Glynis, so old.”

“Because it is!” I bounced down the steps quite fearlessly and peered around a heavy door into a long hall. “It is rather dusty down here. I do not think many people have been this way.”

May was obviously not ready to copy my daring. “Please, Glynis, please come up. I do not like the look of it.”

But I was quite curious and insisted, “Come on down, May. Please come down.”

My sister looked frightened. “If they have not restored that area of the castle, it could be quite dangerous, Glynis.”

“I shall hold your hand, May. Please come on. Let us have an adventure. There are no monsters or ghosts here. Just cobwebs and excitement.”

May frowned when I mentioned ghosts, but she took a deep breath and hurried down to me. Claspng my hand, she looked at me quite adoringly. I realized in that moment she would do anything I asked of her because she truly did love me despite how hurtful I could be at times. I impulsively kissed her cheek, and she bestowed a lovely smile on me.

“I promise, May, this is going to be fun.”

Torches threw light upon us, keeping us from being swallowed by shadows as May looked at me fearfully. This area of the castle was very dark, extremely dirty, and a cold draft flowed freely down the length of the corridor. May clutched my hand tightly as we gazed up at ornate statues of long lost warriors and saints.

“It is rather like a chapel. Or the entrance to one,” May decided.

“Are they not beautiful, May?” I declared.

“They frighten me,” May answered.

“Everything frightens you.”

We both stopped and gazed up at the statue of man who looked remarkably like the Prince. The expression on the roughly hewed statue was that of arrogance and cruelty.

For the first time since last night, I began to feel uneasy and a little frightened. Holding May’s hand tight, I began to walk down the dusty passageway toward enormous doors. I pressed them open and another staircase

lay below us, leading deeper into this wing of the castle. Deep shadows covered the stairs, dark and menacing, as though a piece of the night was hiding from the sun.

“No, Glynis, we cannot. I do not want to go down there,” May whispered.

“I wonder what lies below.” I admit I can be rather foolhardy at times.

“Please, Glynis, please, do not go down there.”

I stared down the stairs, my eyes wide and full of curiosity. I felt a strong desire to set my foot down upon that first step, and yet, I was very afraid. May’s hand slipped away from mine as she drew away from the shadows.

“Glynis, please stop. You are frightening me!”

I heard her voice, but I could not heed her words. I was mesmerized by the darkness below, drawn down to it. Hesitantly, I began to descend the stairs. I found myself in absolute darkness.

A soft, gentle breathing filled my ears. My sister’s cries faded away as the soft whispering I had heard the night before began once more. Strange soft, madly whispering voices. Voices of such sweetness, I felt compelled to move on. A cold chill swept through my body, strangely arousing, yet terrifying.

“Lady Glynis!”

I was startled out of my trance-like state and whirled around. As the top of the stairs, staring down at me, was the old gypsy woman, Ilona. Her hands were on her hips and she looked quite angry. Behind her, May cowered nervously.

“Come to me at once. This area of the castle is not safe. You should not be here!”

The voices stirred around me, gentle and comforting. Somehow, I knew in the darkness below me something exotic, beautiful, and seductive was stirring. The whispers danced on my skin. I suddenly felt afraid.

“What is down there?”

I could still feel the dark power stirring, drawing closer. Yet, I could not bring myself to move.

“Just empty rooms. Old rooms that are falling apart. Now, come here! Come here,” the Gypsy ordered in her thickly accented English. “You must come at once!”

A little put off at being spoken to in such a manner by a servant, I haughtily lifted my chin. I considered dashing down into the darkness, but suddenly, I knew I did not want to know what lay below. With firm steady steps, I walked up to my sister and the angry servant.

“Come, May,” I said taking my sister’s hand.

As we walked away, I could feel Ilona glowering at me.

I turned one last time to look at the mysterious doorway and the servant woman before we returned to our parents. She was holding out her hand in front of her and moving down the stairs, speaking in another tongue.

I could have sworn I heard something ...nay ... someone answer her in a soft

whispering voice.

We found our way back to the library, holding hands, as I mocked the bizarre gypsy woman. By making May laugh, I was able to break her free of fear and see her smile again. But despite my gaiety, I was unnerved by what we had encountered and felt ill at ease.

The library was a large room with a vast fireplace and many shelves stacked full of books. My father sat at a large table looking over a stack of papers while my mother sat on a nearby couch reading a book. The sunlight was streaming in through the diamond paned windows, yet the room seemed cold and gloomy.

Father realized we had entered the room and looked up to smile at us. "Oh, my darlings, did you enjoy your little adventure?"

"It was quite dreadful! Very foreign. And quite old and very dirty in places," May said.

"I thought it was marvelously uncanny, Father." I leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, then flung myself onto the couch next to my mother.

"I do not think it was proper for you two to go off without the Prince to escort you." My mother's reprimand was gentle, but her eyes were wary. "How do we know it is safe?"

"It was safe enough," I assured her.

"The Prince has obviously left us to our own devices. I do not think they did any harm." Father smiled as May sat next to him, laying her head on his shoulder.

In the warmth of my family, our adventure did not seem as fearsome.

"Oh, we just stirred up the ghosts and sent them whispering through the castle," I said gleefully.

"Glynis!"

I grinned at my mother before rising to sit next to my father at the table.

"There are no such thing as ghosts. We are quite beyond that sort of thinking," Father said to me.

I shrugged lightly and leaned over to study his papers. "What are you reading?"

"Prince Vlad left these for me to look at. They are papers describing his financial holdings."

"Is he wealthy?"

"Very wealthy indeed, Glynis."

"Father, you are not going to make me marry him, are you?"

He smiled at me tenderly. I knew he could see the desperation in my eyes and I felt as if I had paled a bit. He placed his very warm hand over mine. "No, my dear. I am not going to make you marry him."

"Edric, but you said-" Mother said sharply.

He cut her off. "Yes, we have discussed this all morning, but the truth remains this. Look at this castle. Yes, the furnishings are lush and quite

beautiful, but very old.”

“Every family of old nobility has such things,” Mother said. She looked so anxious and desperate, her hand flying to her throat.

“Antoinetta, the castle is falling apart in some places.”

“But he says he will repair it...” Her voice floundered, looking at me rather sadly.

“Do you really want her to marry so badly that you would wish her to remain in this place?” Father said it all so gently, but his eyes were determined. “Think, my wife, are you so desperate?”

“Edric, she is nineteen years old!”

“My love, I know that in your heart you want what is best for our daughters, but this is not best for our eldest. Yes, according to these papers our host, Prince Vlad Dracula, is a man of wealth, even prestige. Perhaps he could repair this castle and set it right once more, but think beyond that. He is a foreigner.”

“As am I.” Mother’s voice was bitter.

“And that is why Glynis must marry well in our own country. I do not wish for her to suffer as you have. If she were to marry the Prince, he would be an outsider with strange ways. Glynis would have to live on the outer fringes of high society. I realize, my dear wife, that you are Italian, a woman of deep emotions, but after living so many years in England, do you not see that this man cannot give your daughter the life you wish for her? Neither here nor in England?”

My mother’s beautiful eyes filled with tears and I found myself looking everywhere but at her. I could feel her pain, her desperate love for me, and her desire to see me safe and secure in the lifestyle she deemed suitable for me.

“Buda is quite lovely,” Mother said. A tear slipped down her cheek, and I could not help but move to her side to wipe it away.

“Yes, Buda is a very lovely and modern city, but Glynis would be the outsider here if we left her as his wife. Can you do that with good conscience?”

My mother’s posture relaxed and her gaze fell to the floor. “You are right, Edric. I have been so consumed with my desire to find our daughters good husbands that I have not considered all that you have.” She took my hand and kissed it softly. Looking into my eyes, she said, “I have already dealt with the stigma English society places on foreigners who marry into their world. I do not want that for you.”

“Oh, Mama!” I threw my arms around her with relief and clung to her. I may have had a difficult relationship with her, our wills may have clashed often, but in the end I loved her very much. “Thank you, Mama, thank you!”

My mother hugged me tightly and kissed my cheek, then released me, trying to regain her composure. “I will find you a better husband.”

I pouted at her as May rushed over to hug me. “Oh, Glynis, I’m so happy for you. You can come back to England and marry there.”

I sighed quite dramatically, but my father gave me a warning look and I was silent.

“What will we tell the Prince?” Mother asked.

My father carefully stacked Prince Vlad’s business papers in one corner of the table, his expression deeply thoughtful. “I suppose we could say that we feel Glynis should marry in England and that when he arrives there we can perhaps discuss things further.”

I immediately stomped my foot in protest. “Father!”

“By the time Prince Vlad travels to England, you shall be married, young lady, or I will have to consider the Prince.” My father rose to his feet and held out his hand to me. “Come, be reasonable. You do not want to be a spinster.”

I started to open my mouth to tell him that was certainly fine with me when I realized how deeply upset both my parents were. The castle was dreadful and our journey had been long. Now was not the time to fight with them over my future.

I sighed, letting him take my hand to draw me to his side.

“Now, dear Glynis, I know for a fact that the young Lord Nigel is quite fond of you. But you put him off when you would speak over him to his friends about issues a young woman need not concern herself with. Before we left Rome, his mother sent us a kind letter saying that she missed us and pointedly wrote that Nigel has been asking when you would return.”

“Oh, please! He is such a horrible bore!”

“Glynis, he is not really all that bad. He does have lovely eyes. He is rather nice,” May said.

I shot her a particularly nasty look as my father turned me about to face him.

“Glynis, for my sake, for your mother’s sake, for your own sake, please, please, when we return to England, let Nigel court you. Then when Prince Vlad does arrive, you will be nicely married.” He tucked his fingers under my chin and raised my eyes to his. “Please, Glynis.”

I wanted to argue, but I realized that if I truly wanted to return home and have any hope of constructing my own life, I would have to capitulate at this moment. So I nodded my head, saying softly, “Yes, Father. I will do as you ask.”

“Then it is settled! Good! Finally!” My mother looked close to tears once more. She flung her arms around me and hugged me tightly. “Now we can go home and begin to plan the wedding!”

May clapped her hands together. “Oh, I am so happy!”

“Of course, you, my dear May, are next in line to be married.” My mother gave her a sly smile.

“Oh, dear.” May widened her eyes at us. “Oh, dear!”

My father laughed heartily and kissed her cheek. “Your mother is a persistent woman.” He hugged me warmly and whispered, “Thank you, my darling daughter.”

I whispered back, "I do not want to be here. I want to go home. I cannot bear the thought of staying here."

"Nor could I bear to think of leaving you here."

I felt so overwhelmed that I began to cry. "Thank you, Father, thank you!"

He smiled and patted my back lightly. "There, There."

Chapter 4

Unfinished Letter

To Sir Andrew Wright

From Lady Antoinetta Wright

June 9

My dearest son,

It is with greatest relief that I can write we are soon returning to England. Your headstrong sister has finally decided to be sensible and allow herself to be courted by that lovely Lord Nigel. It has been a daunting task reining in your sister. At times I thought the cause was lost. You know better than most how she can be. But at last she has heard reason and we can finally leave this place.

I am sure this country is quite beautiful in its own way, but I long for our home in England. This place...this place...

Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

10th of August, 1819

It has been difficult to put pen to paper since my last long bout of writing. I had not expected to become so utterly overwhelmed by the memories. I can remember so distinctly that afternoon in the library and the great hope I had well inside of me that soon I should see England again and my home.

What follows is hard to write, yet I find myself wanting to relive it. Wanting to find solace in the last moments my family spent together.

Oh, dearest diary, how sad I am to write what happens next, but I must write it. I must.

That night, after our conversation in the library, I found myself sitting primly next to my mother, dressed in my finest pale green gown, my red hair drawn up into an elegant style. Mother looked very lovely in her sapphire blue gown as she sat reading her book. May and Father stood near the fireplace, attempting to ward off the drafty chill that haunted the library. We were all quite relieved with our decision to return home, yet anxious.

The sun had barely set below the mountains when Ilona announced that dinner would soon be ready and that the Prince had returned. So far, the mysterious Prince Vlad had yet to make an appearance and I was quite relieved.

I was not looking forward to seeing him after the nightmares I had experienced.

I plucked absently at the lace of my dress, my thoughts turning to the journey home. I was desperate to see the old house nestled among the lovely green trees. I wanted to see Andrew and his beautiful wife rush out to greet us and feel their embrace. Perhaps they would throw a lovely party for us. That would be so grand. I would wear my new gown that Mother had bought me in Paris. The dark green one with the flouncy ribbons. Of course, I would have to make a point of acting charitable around Nigel. It would be hard, but I would do anything to escape marrying Prince Vlad. I could perhaps find a way to avoid marrying altogether if I was clever enough. For now, I had to convince my family I was sincere. Perhaps I would write Nigel.

The door swung open and Prince Vlad swept into the room clad all in black, his long reddish hair hanging over his shoulders. Again, I was struck by the intensity of his green eyes. He immediately settled his gaze on me, smiling.

“How beautiful you look, Lady Glynis, on this most lovely of nights,” Prince Vlad said.

“Thank you, sir,” I responded automatically.

“Prince Vlad, we are so glad to see you,” Father said as he swiftly placed himself between the Prince and me.

“Earl Wright, good evening. Good evening Lady May, Countess Wright.” Prince Vlad greeted them all as a true gentleman should. “I am so sorry I was called away early this morning. I meant to be here to show you my castle. Some of the areas of my home are quite beautiful and rich with history.”

“We did look around a bit,” I said rather lightly.

Again those bright green eyes settled on me. “Did you? And did you like my home?”

I felt unnerved by his tone and almost could not look him in the eye. I forced myself to raise my chin. I felt so bare and exposed under his gaze. “Yes, I suppose. There were many interesting...things.” I thought for a moment of the presence I had felt dwelling in the bowels of the castle and felt a chill down my spine. I immediately dismissed these thoughts, afraid to study them any further.

“Yes, many interesting things. This castle holds a great history within its walls. And a great many ghosts.” He smiled at us and disregarded Father’s skeptical gaze.

Prince Vlad was such an impressive figure, tall and strong, all dressed in black with his long flowing hair. He seemed almost inhuman: like a god. And like those gods of old, his mouth had cruelty to its curve that frightened me. When he spoke, his voice seemed to vibrate through me.

When I had met Lord Byron, I had felt a great attraction to the poet and had behaved outrageously girlish. With Prince Vlad, I felt an overwhelming magnetism that seemed to pull on me, yet at the same time repulsed me whenever I drew too near to him or felt his gaze upon me.

“Dinner is ready. We should go and sit down before it begins to cool. Ilona and her helpers have worked hard all day to make you a feast.” Prince Vlad motioned us toward the door. “Come, come, all is ready.”

Again, I tried to linger and be the last one to depart. I did not want to go near the Prince. My father realized my discomfort and tried hard to keep the Prince distracted. Inevitably, his green eyes seemed to constantly find me.

As we walked along the corridor, there was a metallic clatter upon the stone floor. Prince Vlad bent down to retrieve what had fallen. My family had already passed on through the doors into the dining room, and I hurried to pass the kneeling Prince. As I neared him, he looked up at me and his gaze caught mine.

“Glynis,” he whispered.

I stared down into his eyes and saw the passion burning in them. The passion he had for me. The deep dark desire that hungered deep inside of him. The intensity of his gaze burned into my soul, and I stood there transfixed.

“Do not be afraid,” he said as he slowly stood. In his long hand was a golden chain on which a gold dragon dangled from the links.

I gasped, unable to understand how something from my dreams had entered reality.

Vlad’s sensuous mouth spread into a smile as he held out his arm to me.

Feeling beguiled, I slipped my hand into the crook of his arm, allowing him to lead me into the dining room. As we entered, I could see the shocked expressions on my family’s face. I slowly withdrew my hand from the Prince’s arm. I recovered myself and slid into the chair he drew back for me. I was seated next to him, of course.

As our dinner began, he turned all his attention to me. Though his English was heavily accented, he made a great effort to speak well, often searching for the right words. I tried to concentrate on eating, but Prince Vlad kept asking me questions. My father tried to divert his attention, but the Prince seemed determined to cast all his attention on me despite my discomfort.

“Did you enjoy Buda, Lady Glynis?”

“Yes, it was very lovely,” I responded, trying to take a bite of food before he asked another question.

“We especially enjoyed the beauty of the cathedrals.” My mother smiled sweetly at him. “Which church do you attend in Buda?”

“I have my own personal chapel on my estate,” Vlad said smoothly, returning his gaze to me.

“Really?” My mother was quite persistent. “We saw many grand estates when we were in Buda. Which was yours?”

The Prince returned his gaze to her slowly, his green eyes quite intense. “Near the Danube, dear lady. Lady Glynis, did you enjoy the shops?”

May cleared her throat and managed to say, “We both did, sir.”

“Did you now?” the Prince said in such a way that May reddened.

I quickly took another bite of my meal and tried to look busy chewing.

My father sat down his fork and looked directly at the Prince. He wore an expression that said he was done with the games. "Prince, Vlad, I think it only right that I inform you that we plan to leave at dawn. I have already spoken with my driver and guide." His posture was stiff and his voice cool. He seemed very uncomfortable with Prince Vlad's behavior.

Rage erupted in the Prince's eyes and darkened his features. It literally made me jump in my chair and my spoon clattered to the floor.

"What is this you say?" His voice was a veritable roar.

"I said we are leaving in the morning, sir. My wife and daughters are tired of our long sojourn and I believe it is best we start our journey home," my father responded.

"I do not understand. When I wrote to Sir Stephen, my dearest friend in Buda, I thought I made it very clear that I was interested in a marriage contract with your family." Vlad's voice was dark and he was staring straight at my father.

"Yes, I know, sir." My father took a breath. "Perhaps once you arrive in England, we can discuss a marriage between you and my daughter at length."

"We can speak of it now!" Prince Vlad's lips were drawn tight beneath his mustache and his strong hands gripped the table. "I am a man of wealth, a man of prestige from a fine family. I have a title. I have power. Why is it you will not grant me your daughter's hand?"

"Sir, you are not known in England. We must consider our daughter's social standing!" My mother's temper flared hot, and her eyes were bright with emotion.

"Perhaps when you are established in England--"

"Nonsense!" Vlad cut off my father's words with an angry snort. "I have told you my plans. I will go to England. I will be accepted there and your daughter will be my princess. Sir Stephen, my dear friend, made it very clear that you were desperate for a husband for your temperamental daughter!"

"Do not insult my daughter!" My father was on his feet at this point.

I remember thinking that the Prince's comment was actually not far removed from the truth, but my father was now quite furious.

Prince Vlad also rose to his feet, lowering his tone when he spoke. "It is not my desire, Lord Edric, to insult the woman I desire to be my wife, but your absolute disregard for what is right and proper has made my tongue loose."

"What is right and proper is that we find a suitable husband for our daughter." My father's voice was now very sharp. "Surely you must understand our dilemma. Had we known the condition of this castle we never would have journeyed here. We expected an estate such as those we visited in Buda. Our daughters are our greatest treasures. We cannot let Glynis simply marry you because we traveled here under a false impression."

“This is my ancestral home! How dare you insult it! My house in Buda is very nice, very modern. I can easily provide your daughter with a lifestyle suitable to her station in life.”

“Buda is not the place for my daughter,” my mother said firmly. “She belongs in England with her family.”

“We are leaving tomorrow, Prince Vlad. I expect you to respect our decision.” My father was curt in his manner, and I felt proud of him.

Prince Vlad took several deep breaths, then slowly sat down in his chair. “Very well.” He turned his gaze toward me. “You may leave, but Glynis stays.”

“Never!” My mother’s voice was sharp.

“Absolutely not,” my father’s voice chorused with my Mother’s.

Prince Vlad gazed at my father evenly, and said, “I will ask you once more, Earl Wright, and your answer had best be the proper one. Will you leave Glynis here to be my bride?”

My father very calmly regarded the Prince as he tossed down the napkin he had been clutching tightly in one hand. “I would never leave my daughter here. I do not appreciate your damned impertinence. We have decided. We are leaving tomorrow with both our daughters.”

Prince Vlad chuckled deep in his throat. “Very well. You have decided your own destiny. Leave tomorrow morning. But remember, your fate was of your own choosing.” His words were ominous and I shivered.

“Antoinetta, Glynis, May, come along. Good evening, Prince Vlad, we shall retire now.

I had never heard my father speak so forcibly before and it made me proud, yet afraid. I could feel Prince Vlad’s eyes on me as I trailed behind Father. Impulsively, just as I was about to pass through the doorway, I turned.

His feet were propped up on the corner of the table while he stared at me with wild glee in his eyes. He chuckled to himself, his eyes reflecting the red color of the flames in the fireplace.

“Sleep well, Glynis,” he called after me, and threw back his head, howling with laughter.

I fled after father.

An hour later, my mother double-checked the bolt on my door. “All is packed, correct?”

“Yes, Mother. All save my traveling clothes and nightgown.” I sat on the bed brushing out my long red hair. “I shall be ready as soon as it is morning.”

“I will be glad to be away from this ghastly place. That horrible Prince Vlad frightened me so. But your father was quite strong, and I was very proud of him.” Mother walked over and laid a kiss on my cheek. “We shall soon be away from this place and all will be as it should be. Now, sleep well, my dearest, and make sure to bolt the door behind me.”

I followed her to the door, kissed her cheek fondly, then shut and locked the

door behind her. I was relieved that soon we would depart from this place, yet I felt unsettled and wary. I glanced warily about, studying the shadows. The floor was cold against my bare feet and I hurried to the bed. Leaping onto it, I snatched up the covers, drawing them tight over my body. The bed still smelled odd, but I was so cold and tired, I did not mind. I curled up under the covers, nestling down.

Silently, I said my prayers and closed my eyes.

Soon, I was asleep.

I stirred when soft voices murmured about me. Sleepily, my eyes fluttered open, adjusting to the dim firelight. Rubbing my eyes, I peered into the shadows.

A woman's voice uttered words softly, dreamily.

Slowly, it dawned on me that three women were standing around me, gazing down on me. Their backs were to the fire so it was hard to make out their faces, but two appeared to have dark hair and third, long blond hair. All were dressed in flowing ivory gowns that seemed to sparkle like fresh dew on a lily.

One of the women murmured in a foreign tongue, her voice brushing over me like silken threads.

The three women laughed together as one of the dark haired women moved closer to me. I tried to sit up and demand to know why they were in my chamber, but I found that my limbs were leaden. I could not move. As she leaned closer, I could see the strong beautiful features of the woman. Her eyes were dark and bright. Her voluptuous mouth was red and smiling. Slowly, the strange woman reached out a long, fine hand and ran it over my red tresses. She turned to whisper something in her own language to the others and they laughed together.

Frightened by the bizarre women, I tried to move away, but again I could not move. My body was limp. All I could do was move my eyes about beneath my lashes.

Another woman - perhaps a little younger than I - stretched out beside me on the bed. Her hair was long and curly, wound with long chains of gold adorned with jewels. Fingertips trailed over my face, then down my arm as she studied me with curiosity I found alarming. I tried to pull away from those cold, cold fingers as she lightly drew them up my arm, then down over my chest. Her hand stilled over my heart and she gently pressed her palm against my skin. Closing her eyes, seeming to swoon, she hummed softly. I realized she was chorusing the beating of my frightened heart.

"Stop," I managed to whisper.

The woman's eyes flicked open as she leaned down close over my face. I could see her eyes were brown flecked with gold, and her lips were so red they seemed to be glistening with fresh blood. She continued to hum to me, singing the sound of my beating heart, beating faster and faster.

The blond woman pulled her back from me, chiding her in another language.

The younger woman looked at her belligerently, then laughed. Grabbing the hand of the other dark haired woman, she ran into the corner of the room, dragging her sister behind her. The shadows seemed to swallow them up and they were gone.

My heart was thudding so hard in my chest it almost hurt. I felt as if my breath would not come quickly enough. And still, I could not move.

Leaning over me, the golden haired lady touched my face with a soft, cold hand. Her face was exquisitely beautiful, and her eyes shimmered like jewels. "You are so alive. I can feel your warmth." Her voice was soft, musical, her words richly accented as she spoke perfect English. "I can almost taste your heartbeat on my tongue. Feel it beating like a pulse in my teeth. So warm, so alive, so beautiful." Her hand lightly stroked my hair as she studied my features, smiling lightly. "You are so warm, alive...but soon you will join us. It is the Master's desire. Soon, you shall be our sister, my daughter."

I could feel myself trembling violently beneath the covers. Was this the same woman I saw beside the road our first night here? I was sure it was. Her hands were so cold just like those of the apparition. She must be a wraith! Some sort of ghastly creature of the night!

Suddenly, she seized me up in her arms, her hands cold and strong. Blue eyes, burning with fire, stared down into mine. Her fingers slid into my hair as she held me, pressing me tightly against her.

"Release me," I whispered in vain.

Her eyes glittered as she smiled then kissed me. Her lips were cold like ice as they slid from my lips over my cheek as she turned my face away from her. The long golden locks slid over my face, obscuring my view.

I heard Vlad's voice whispering my name as I was suddenly crushed between two cool bodies. Something sharp grazed my throat and my hands flailed at my sides. I heard more whispering and laughter, as the pain became greater.

"Release me!" My voice erupted from my lips.

A sharper pain pierced the other side of my throat. I was aware of two people on either side of me, crushing me to them, my hair being drawn back sharply by one of them.

They suddenly released me, and I fell back on the bed, my body limp as my head fell painfully to one side. My breath seemed shallow in my chest and I could not move. My throat felt ravaged and raw, something warm trickling down between my breasts. I saw, once more, three women standing next to the bed whispering as the shadows danced around them. The blond apparition's mouth was smeared with blood. One of the dark haired women licked away a bloody drop from the blond woman's lips with a long pink tongue.

Prince Vlad moved slowly over me, bare-chested, the gold medallion glittering in the firelight. Slowly, he lowered his head, sweeping his tongue up over my chest. When he raised his head, I saw his lips smeared with blood.

“Sleep,” the Prince whispered and the world grew dim.

As I fell back into a restless slumber, the last thing I saw was the three women and their beautiful smiles with their long wicked teeth.

Chapter 5

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright - Continued

The next morning my father was already lifting May into the carriage when my mother and I stepped out of the castle. Ovidiu, the guide, and the driver were busy checking over the harnesses and horses, having already loaded our luggage onto the carriage. As we hurried across the courtyard, I gave the old decrepit castle one last dark glance.

“It is all right, Glynis. We are leaving,” my mother assured me, grabbing hold of my hand.

I was haunted by my nightmares, and I know she saw my fear reflected in my eyes. I had awoken after my nightmare, curled up in a tight little ball beneath my covers. I had immediately run to the looking glass to study my throat only to find it smooth save for tiny insect bites on either side. My bizarre nightmare had turned ordinary bites into something altogether more disturbing.

“I had such an awful fear that I would never leave here,” I confessed.

“Well, you are leaving. Up with you!” Father caught me firmly and lifted me into the carriage.

Gratefully, I settled into my seat, arranging my long coat, scarf and skirts as my mother climbed in. I tried not to look at the castle, but my eyes were drawn to the crumbling façade. What strange things had happened here. My dreams had been odd and frightening, full of terrible visions and wanton lusts.

The cool crisp air of the gray morning stung my cheeks red and my eyes were bright with the excitement of finally being away from this awful place. Much to my relief and that of my family, Prince Vlad had not come down to see us off.

May fidgeted with her bonnet as I finally settled into my seat. My father slammed the door shut, enclosing us in the safety of the coach, and he sat back in his seat with a sigh of relief. I tucked my hand into his as the carriage rolled forward and slowly turned about, the horses’ hooves clapping against the flagstones.

“There, there,” he said softly, patting my hand, and I was comforted.

As the carriage departed the castle courtyard, I resisted one last look and concentrated on my mother’s face. This morning my mother looked quite young and beautiful, any signs of harshness faded from her lovely features. She was far too relieved to be away from the castle to nag me or May.

The carriage was soon traveling at top speed, away from the castle and the

strange man whom dwelt there. As the miles that separated the carriage from the castle increased, we slowly began to relax. Even May smiled when Mother said, “Well, it would be that the first man on this journey taken with Glynis was totally unsuitable.”

I giggled and snuggled up to my father. “Thank you, dear Father, for getting us away from that horrible, horrible man.”

My father just smiled and said, “There, there.” But I could see the relief in his eyes and his strong hand holding mine made me feel protected and loved.

For an hour we traveled through the misty mountain passes as the sun struggled to rise higher in the sky only to be brutally overwhelmed by dark menacing clouds that billowed out over the valley. I watched the approaching storm with apprehension. The storm seemed to not only be gaining strength, but also pursuing us.

“Father, if the storm hits us, will the pass become too treacherous?”

My father stared out the window, contemplating my words. He watched the lightning flashing deep within the storm clouds and listened to the long rumble of the thunder rolling. “It does seem to be growing stronger.” He leaned out of the window. “Ovidiu! Ovidiu! Can we beat the storm to the village?”

My mother leaned forward to gaze out over the lush valley. “I do not even see the village.”

Father pulled his head into the carriage. His expression did not comfort us.

“What is it?” Mother demanded.

“The driver is confused. He says that we are not heading in the right direction and every time he tries to double back, we only seem to end up where we began.”

“I do not understand. What does that mean, Father?” May looked very pale with her pink lips trembling.

Fearfully, I leaned over and out of the carriage as far as I dared. The dark, menacing castle loomed close behind us. “Oh, God!”

“Glynis, do not take the Lord’s in-Oh, Lord, no!” Mother obviously could not believe her eyes as the carriage turned slowly. “Why are we heading back?”

“They are going to try and descend the way we traveled the other night,” Father answered. His brow was deeply furrowed, his hand clenched against his chin.

“I do not want to go near that place!” I protested.

“There, there, dear. All will be well.” My father took my hand in his and squeezed gently.

As the carriage raced down the steep path toward the castle, I could not tear my eyes from it. I could barely breathe until the carriage passed by the crumbling entrance and turned down the pass we had ascended previously. I was afraid that every darkened window of the great castle hid the face of the horrible Vlad Dracula.

Mother leaned forward and took my hand. “We are away from that horrible

place, Glynis. Do not be frightened.”

Impulsively, I kissed her. “I will not be.”

With a smile, Mother sat back and held May in her arms. “All will be well soon.”

“She is right, dears. The castle will soon be far behind us,” Father said firmly.

I tried to believe my parents, but I was frightened. The dark, rolling sounds of thunder were nearly overhead and the first tiny drops of the coming rains spattered against the side of the carriage. I leaned against my father’s arm and he patted my cheek.

“There, there, Glynis. Just a few more hours and we will be in a nice village inn.”

No matter how comforting my father’s words were, I could not fight off the overwhelming fear that I would not escape the looming presence of the castle. I could still see the decayed battlements over the tops of the trees. I could not wipe from my mind the way Prince Vlad had looked upon me with such lust and confidence. He had seemed amused as if he had knowledge of my fate that I did not possess.

The horses began to neigh and the carriage lurched back and forth abruptly, then came to a stop. We were all thrown to the floor in a heap of silk skirts.

“Damn it all!” Father wrenched the door open and leaped out.

Ovidiu’s voice called out, “Kind, sir, there is no way down!”

“Nonsense!”

I leaned out of the carriage and watched as my father marched toward the horses, his coat flaring out about him. The rain pelted down on him with increasing fierceness. His hat flew off and he barely caught it with one hand. His pale hair was instantly plastered to his noble forehead.

“No way down! No way down,” the driver called out in heavily accented words.

Terrified at their words, I jumped from the carriage and ran after my father. My traveling shoes slipped in the mud as I fought the wind, my hand clasped to my bonnet. “What do they mean? Father, what do they mean?”

As I drew near him, I saw that my father’s shoulders were rounded in a heavy droop. His hand was slowly rubbing the top of his head as he stared downward.

Then I saw what had him so overwhelmed.

A great chasm had opened up and split the road apart. A deep gorge now cut through the mountain pass and there was simply no way around it. I could not believe my eyes. We had just traveled this road two days before and for this to happen was inconceivable.

“How? How?” My father’s voice a mere whisper. A terrified whisper.

“We were at the castle of a wicked man, Lord Edric,” Ovidiu said. “A wicked, evil man! He has great powers! He promised us safety when we were his guests, but now that we have left him, he will not spare us!”

“What nonsense! Ovidiu, there has to be a way off this damned mountain. We will go back and find it.”

Ovidiu turned and spoke swiftly to the driver in their native tongue. The dark, haggard driver kept shaking his head, clasping his hand over his crucifix.

“We think that we should perhaps try to go on foot or on the horses and leave the carriage,” Ovidiu said, his voice shaking.

“Nonsense! We have the women to consider and the storm is nearly upon us. We will go back and this time keep track of the roads. There is a way off this damned mountain and we will find it. Come, Glynis!”

I rushed after my very upset Father and stumbled a little as I did. When we reached the carriage, he lifted me up then followed me in.

“What is happening, Edric?” My mother looked pale and frightened as she tried to soothe my moaning sister.

“The way down has been cut off. A landslide perhaps. We have to try and find another way down.” Though his face was quite stern and his eyes anxious, he forced a smile and kissed Mother gently on the forehead. “It is nonsense to think this is something other than a natural phenomenon.”

I gazed at my father sadly. I knew he was a man who was skeptical of all things supernatural. He attended all sorts of lectures about enlightenment and the rational mind. I had not seen him enter a church since we were small children, and I had the impression he endured Mother’s fervent Catholicism. He was, by nature, a skeptical man. But I had seen his face at the gorge. Despite his words, I knew, in that moment, staring into the chasm, he had believed that somehow the Prince had reached out with his power and destroyed our way to the village.

May burst into tears and buried her face in Mother’s shoulder. My mother held her tightly, looking toward me. I reached out to her and we clasped hands for a tender moment.

“Do not be frightened, my darlings. All will be well. There, there,” Father said soothingly. He had quite recovered himself at this point and looked his normal calm self. He put his arm around my shoulders and hugged me close.

The storm bellowed overhead and erupted with such fury the entire carriage began to shudder. The horses whinnied with terror as the carriage lurched into motion. It had not traveled far when the storm began to beat down on us with such savagery the driver was forced to seek shelter in a thicket of trees. The hiding place only spared us a little from the brutality of the wind and the rain. lightning flashed brilliantly all around us.

For several hours, we huddled inside the carriage, cold and wet, fearing the ferocity of the storm. I sat close to Father, trying to seek both warmth and assurance. Deep within me was a horrible fear that we were never going to be free of this place. Oh, how I wished I had behaved myself when my family had been in Italy and France. Perhaps if I had been more agreeable we would not be in such a horrible predicament. Guilt raged within me as fiercely as the storm.

My mother sat across from me, her eyes clenched tightly while her fingers slid over the beads of her rosary as she prayed. Ever faithful May sat beside her, following her in her prayers. They did not deserve this. Perhaps I did, but they certainly did not.

Whimpering slightly, I pressed myself more deeply into the embrace of my father and felt his gentle hand patting my back.

I thought of my nightmare of Prince Vlad and those horrible women with the sharp teeth. What if had not been a dream? What if all of this was a manifestation of his evil? Of his power? Then, surely, we would never escape.

I felt warm tears fall down my cheeks and covered my face with my hand.

After a while, we became hungry and ate a bit of the food the gypsy women had given us. I still remembered their dark eyes as they had handed us the basket. I suspected it was pity I had seen dwelling in their gaze. I ate slowly, feeling a tight pinch in my throat and a nervous flutter in my stomach. May was too upset to eat, but I ate the piece of chicken and the fruit Mother gave me. Even though my stomach was churning, I was famished. I had felt listless since awakening in the morning and the burning emptiness inside of me did not lessen with the food. Yet, the food tasted divine. As I chewed on the succulent flesh of a ripe apple, it never occurred to me that I was eating my last meal.

The day slipped by quickly for it was mid-afternoon when the carriage finally rolled past the castle. We said not a word as we watched it slip past the window. May whimpered a bit so I reached out and took her hand to calm her.

For what seemed like an eternity, the carriage kept turning down narrow roads as the driver tried to find his way down into the valley below. But every road that initially turned downward would soon lead right back up the mountain. No matter which way the carriage turned, we could not escape the presence of Prince Vlad's castle looming over us.

The storm clouds disappeared into the horizon and the sun appeared hovering low over the valley. The evening was approaching.

"Father, the sun is beginning to set," I whispered.

"I know, dear, but we will not turn back. We can travel at night if we need to."

"I cannot believe the day has already passed us by," Mother said. "I just cannot believe how horrible all of this has been."

"There, there, Antoinetta. We must not worry the children."

"Too late, Father. I am very worried and very frightened," I said.

"As am I!" May clutched her rosary tightly. "Oh, I just wish we were far away from this horrible place."

"Ovidiu will find a way down and soon we shall be in a cozy inn," Father said firmly.

"Oh, God, Edric, let it be true."

I watched as the bright orange sun descended to its resting place beyond the

mountains. Long, black shadows filled the lush valley below and to my absolute delight, I saw the flicker of lights in the distance.

“Father, the village!”

“Thank God! It is there, Edric!”

“Ovidiu, Ovidiu!” Father leaned out of the carriage window.

I threw my arms around May and kissed her on both cheeks affectionately.

“You see, May! All will be well!”

“They see the road that leads downward. It very clearly cuts down toward the valley,” Father announced with a jovial laugh.

I cheered and hugged him. We all embraced each other as Mother clasped her rosary tight and thanked all the Saints, the Virgin, and the Holy Trinity. Father just smiled at her, slightly shaking his head as he sat back in his seat and finally relaxed.

My eyes settled on the quickly setting sun while I settled back in my place. Night moved swiftly to embrace the earth, and I felt a chill rush through my veins. An overwhelming terror filled me as the sun fell below the jagged, majestic lines of the mountain range. The night fell swiftly and the carriage rolled to a stop so the lanterns could be lit.

“We must hurry!” I tried to urge the men to work faster. My pulse began to throb in my neck and wrists. Despair spread through my soul as the fear that we would never escape rose up and filled me. The night was a tangible, sinister force surrounding the carriage, pressing in around us, trying to slow us down, and trying to stop us. I knew, instinctively, that we were in great danger. I could not explain my own emotions, but deep within me, I knew we were now being pursued.

Fearfully, I glanced back toward the distant black silhouette of the castle.

“Do not worry, Glynis. We will be in the village soon,” Father declared.

Ovidiu finished lighting the lanterns and climbed back up on the driver’s seat. We lurched onward, descending.

“Finally! I cannot wait to sink into a comfortable bed! This has certainly been the most tiring of days, Edric. This whole episode has been quite taxing on all of us.”

“Well, it is almost over, dear,” Father assured Mother.

“It will be such a comfort to finally be on our way to London. I have had quite enough of these foreign lands.” Mother was beginning to return to her regular prickly self, which, to my surprise, was an enormous relief. It meant that Mother was no longer afraid.

We fell into silence as May dozed off in our mother’s arms while Father watched the lights of the village growing stronger in the distance. The soft creaking and moaning of the carriage interlaced with the sighing of the night wind began to lull me to sleep despite my worries. I was still very frightened, but as the carriage found its way down toward the village and the castle drifted

farther and farther away over the sea of the treetops, I began to finally relax.

The howling of wolves broke the quiet of the night. I bolted upright in my seat and peered out of the windows. I was not surprised to see three wolves race past the carriage, their eyes glowing as they caught the light from the lanterns. The beasts were without a doubt the same three wolves I had seen before. Two were dark, the third was white.

With amazing speed they darted in front of the carriage, disappearing into the darkness before us. I leaned so far out of the window the branches of the trees reaching over the pass caught my bonnet and wrenched it from my head.

“Father, those same three wolves just ran past us!”

Before my father could answer me, blue fire erupted into the darkness before the carriage. The horses screamed in horror and the carriage nearly toppled as the horses wrenched about to avoid the dancing blue flames. I was thrown back as it rolled about, seemingly out of control.

“What is happening?” Mother screamed.

The horses dragged the carriage completely about and began to race in absolute terror back up to the road. I managed to pull myself from the floor and to the window. A brilliant blue fire was pursuing the carriage. Its strange blue flames twisted in the wind as it rolled after us.

“Father, look!”

He leaned about beside me and I saw his face pale. “It cannot be! What is it?”

We could hear Ovidiu screaming that the horses were out of control and that the driver had lost the reins.

“We are going back,” I whispered, falling back into my seat in despair.

The carriage lurched upwards and around a dangerous curve, tossing us all onto the floor. We lay there in a heap, trying to hold on the best we could as the carriage bounced back up into the mountains.

May was screaming hysterically while Mother clutched her rosary tightly.

“Dear God in heaven, when will this end?” she cried out.

It ended in the courtyard of the castle of Prince Vlad Dracula. After a long, terrifying ride, the horses led the carriage straight up to the front door and finally came to a stop.

The carriage rocked gently as the horses anxiously neighed and pawed at the ground. An eerie silence filled the night, broken only by the harsh orders barked out by the terrified driver. The horses just tossed their heads, their eyes large with terror and did not move.

The blue fire that had pursued us up the mountain now rolled and swayed at the mouth of the courtyard. Its beautiful iridescent flames appeared to enshroud three figures.

“Ovidiu, move this carriage now!” Father shouted.

May cowered in Mother’s embrace as huge tears spilled down her pale

cheeks. Mother looked furious, yet very frightened. Her long fingers were tightly grasping her rosary. I stared with fascination mixed with horror at the blue flames dancing so prettily in the night. I could not believe that we were at the castle and could not bear to even look at its ruined countenance.

We were trapped in a hideous nightmare.

“Father, we must leave,” I whispered. “Please, Father, we need to leave.”

“I know, Glynis. I know. Damn it all, Ovidiu, get this carriage moving!”

Ovidiu’s dark face appeared at the window, his eyes wide with fear. “The fire, Lord Edric, it is the devil’s fire. The horses will not go near it!”

Even though his face remained stoic, Father’s eyes clearly revealed how frightened he truly was. “Then we leave on foot!”

“Oh, Edric!”

“It is the only way, Antoinetta. Girls, gather only what you can carry and move swiftly.”

Father thrust open the carriage door and began to step down as we hurriedly grabbed up our things and prepared to flee.

The great door to the castle swung open. Dark gypsy men poured out, torches held high. They quickly encircled the carriage, their eyes menacing. The torches crackled and popped as they threw menacing shadows across the face of the castle.

“Edric,” Mother whispered, her hand grasping his arm.

Prince Vlad swept out of the castle, his long black coat flaring out about him. I could feel tendrils of dark power pulling on me as reluctantly my gaze was drawn to him. His long auburn hair fell down his back in thick curls and his mustache was longer, the ends pointed downward at the corners of his cruel mouth. His flesh seemed unearthly pale and his green eyes flickered with light as cat’s eyes do. He smiled a fiendish smile and I saw clearly two long teeth.

“Father!” I gripped his arm tightly.

“I see,” my father whispered.

“Welcome home, my bride,” Prince Vlad said throwing out his arms. He laughed low in his throat, enjoying the sight of us cowering in the carriage behind my father.

“You monster! What sorcery did you use to bring us here?” Mother was trembling with rage and fear. “We are Christian people!”

“We are citizens of the British Empire,” Father said in a low voice. “To treat us in this manner is barbaric. You are a monster, sir, a monster.”

Prince Vlad seemed amused by my parents’ outbursts. “I have been called a monster many a time before, Earl Wright, dear Countess. I find it to be a compliment to my power. I do not care if you are Christian people. I, too, once served the Church. I was once a defender of the faith.” As he spoke, his voice became lower, harsher. “But those days are long past. I do have every right to do with you as I please. This is my country. My land.” Vlad’s eyes flashed a

deep red as they narrowed, his posture becoming threatening. He regarded my parents with disdain. "You were guests in my house. I offered you my hospitality, yet you denied me what I desire."

Prince Vlad's eyes flicked to me, and I shrank back from his potent gaze.

"You cannot coerce me to give you my daughter's hand!"

Prince Vlad chuckled, stroking his mustache slowly. "Ah, Edric, your words mean nothing to me. We are in my country. I rule here. I have the power of life and death in this land." Vlad's menacing laughter rang out. "And I will have what I desire. Come to me, Glynis."

Trembling with fear, I looked upon him and began to weep. His voice had resounded within me, calling me to him. I could feel my body struggling to rise.

"No!" My mother screamed, clutching me to her. "You cannot have her! Never!"

Father pressed me back behind him as he blocked the carriage doorway.

I felt as if my breath was leaving me, and I could feel my body coiling to fight him. I covered my face with my hands as I felt his power continue to pull on me. I was doomed and knew it.

"I asked you before with proper respect for your rank for your daughter's hand in marriage. I asked you to leave her here as my bride. You ungraciously refused me and denounced my position as lowly. But now you will see my power. I have brought you here with my will. It was my power that drew you. And now, Edric, you have damned your family, and you shall never leave alive."

My father was stunned for a moment, then he shouted, "You cannot do this!"

We cowered behind him, in a heap of silk petticoats, crying and holding each other tightly. I embraced my sister and mother with all my strength, ignoring the sickening pull I felt ripping at me. If he called me again, I knew I would go to the Prince.

It was then that the driver and Ovidiu dashed away. They managed to avoid the gypsy guards and raced toward a path leading away from the castle. The gypsies began to pursue them, but Vlad lifted his hand and motioned them back.

"No! Let my Brides feast tonight!"

The mysterious blue fire eerily began to pursue the two frantic men. Ovidiu was almost to the path, the driver close behind, when the flames whirled up, then down upon them. Terrified screams rang out. As the men shrieked in pain and fear, I thought I heard the soft laughter of women.

Prince Vlad watched with delight as the blue fire completely enveloped the fleeing men. The twisting blue fire danced wildly for a moment, then drew in upon itself and was gone. The screams of the men abruptly ceased, and they were nowhere to be seen.

"What madness is this?" Father whispered in horror.

Two gypsies moved forward and grabbed hold of Father. Screaming, we tried to draw him back into the false safety of the carriage, but they wrenched him

from us.

“Leave him be!” Mother shouted, her face fierce in the torchlight.

Prince Vlad moved swiftly toward the carriage, and Mother threw herself in front of us.

“Let us be! We never meant you any harm!”

He smirked at her, reached in, shoved her to one side, and grabbed hold of my arm. All three of us began to shriek. Mother began to hit him with her fists as May scratched at his hand. I tried to hold onto my mother and sister, but he easily pulled me from them. Drawing me out of the carriage, Prince Vlad wound his fingers in my red hair and pulled back my head.

“You, my darling, are mine,” he whispered in my ear, and licked my throat with his long, thick tongue.

“You bastard!” Father’s voice shouted.

Through my tears, I could see my father trying to break free of his captors.

Vlad laughed, turned back into the castle, and dragged me behind him.

“Bring the others!”

I clutched at his wrist, trying to keep him from pulling my hair from my scalp. I stumbled behind him, crying out in pain, anger, and frustration.

“All this is yours now. I give you all I possess!”

“I do not want it! Let me go! I hate you! Let me go! I want to be with my family!”

He ignored my screams and laughed at me. He threw me into the arms of two gypsy women, and said, “Prepare her for tonight.”

“No! No! Release me! I want to go home! I do not want to be here!”

I fought the gypsy women, but their fingers bit into my skin as they dragged me up the stairs. I kicked and fought them, but they steadily drew me away from my family.

Looking over my shoulder, I could see my family being led into the castle. Mother was holding May in her arms, my sister’s eyes closed, her long hair spilling over her shoulder. It was apparent that she had collapsed. My mother looked fierce in the flickering light from the torches, tears staining her face. Father’s face was flushed with anger as he continued to struggle to free himself from the guards. I watched as Prince Vlad approached, and Father finally broke free from the guards.

Bravely, my father launched himself at the Prince. “You bastard! I will kill you!”

Father tried to strike the Prince, but Vlad’s hand moved so quickly, I could only hear the impact of his hand against my father’s cheek. In horror, I watched Father fall at Prince Vlad’s feet, stunned.

“For that, you shall die first.”

Mother and I both began to scream. The gypsies pulled me up the steep staircase and my last vision was of my mother slumping to the floor, May falling

from her grasp as she held out her hands to Prince Vlad imploring him for mercy.

The gypsies wrenched me away from the stairs and down a long corridor, my sobs echoing around me. I knew, in my heart that Father would die on this dreadful night. I collapsed to my knees, but the women pulled me up, holding me tightly between them, to march me down the hall.

“Please, let me go,” I pleaded with them. My strength was gone. “Please, let me go.”

They led me on as they would a small child.

It was then I heard my father cry out and my mother began to scream. I fell to the ground, my heart shattering within me. I knew that Prince Vlad had murdered my father.

For a short moment, the gypsies released my arms. I buried my face in my hands, rocking before them. Their faces showed no emotion as my mother’s screams grew louder and rang throughout the castle.

As the low, seductive laughter of Prince Vlad swelled up from below us, they reached down and drew me to my feet.

“Please, please,” I begged.

But there was no mercy for me. I was taken far from the staircase and deep into the castle. So deep, my mother’s screams faded away.

This was madness! Madness!

I must be mad, I thought. This could not be happening! And yet, it was.

The gypsies tore my clothes from my body and forced me into a tub of water where they set about roughly bathing me. I let them do as they pleased as I wept, my tears falling into the cold water. My body shuddered with my tormented sobs. I was drawn from the water and laid on the floor. They dried me with huge rough cloths.

“Stop crying,” one of them finally said in English.

“My father...”

“He never should have defied the Prince,” she answered. Her strong fingers gripped my damp hair and she looked fiercely into my eyes. “Always do as he tells you. Always.”

Together, they pulled me to my feet and led me into another chamber. It was there they dressed me in a fine white nightgown of purest silk and brushed out my long hair.

I sat with my hands in my lap as they tugged at my curls, shaping them with their hands and brushes. My face hurt from crying, and the tears were now just a mere trickle down my cheeks. It hurt to breathe and it hurt to ponder the terrible events of the night. I did not want to think or feel. I sat and stared at a crack in the stone floor, ignoring the women around me.

The gypsies finished preparing me for whatever horrible plans the Prince had for me, and led me to the bedchamber I had slept in the two nights before. They left me there to wait for him. I covered my face with my hands and trembled in

terror.

I wanted to die and join my father in heaven. But, alas, I knew I was not going to die. I was going to wait. I was going to wait in that awful, cold room where terrible nightmares had plagued me. I was going to wait for the monster that called himself Prince Vlad.

So, reluctantly, I waited in trembling silence.

Trying to calm my wildly beating heart, I began to recite the Lord's Prayer.

As midnight approached and my fear deepened, I stood watch in the dusty, dark bedchamber, listening to the distant cries of wolves. Shivering in my flimsy nightgown, pale with fear and despair, I waited.

I could not let myself ponder the fate of my family anymore. If I did, I would go surely mad. I had to wait and see what horror the Prince would visit upon me. In my heart, I wanted him to kill me as he had my Father. I knew that I would never escape this place except to die. I also knew he would come tonight. I had seen it in his eyes. The way those dark green eyes had rested on me with unholy lust had been a promise. A dark, evil promise.

I held my hands close to my breast, listening to the awful ragged sound of my own tortured breathing. The night was full of shadows and half-heard whispers. It was as if the very darkness had sprung to life, reaching for me, trying to claim me.

Outside the one long narrow window, the moon was full, glowing a pale unearthly light. It washed the mountains in a pale blue light, creating chilling shadows.

There was no comfort to be found.

The words of the Lord's Prayer faded from my dry lips. Fear finally robbed me of my voice. Even my body was paralyzed. My only movement was the nervous rocking of my body as I stood in the center of the bed chamber waiting. Waiting for the Prince. Waiting for my fate. Waiting to endure whatever evil the Prince had designed for me.

"Glynis, Glynis, sweet Glynis..."

A voice soft, sweet, and seductive whispered through the night. It was a woman's voice that was ever so softly crying out my name.

"Who is there?"

Desperately, my eyes flicked about the room, searching for the source of the siren song.

"Dearest sister of the night," the voice whispered, tinged with an accent.

"Who is there?" My voice was barely audible to my own ears. "Reveal yourself," I said in a louder voice.

"We are here."

Before my eyes, the moonlight pouring through the window shimmered and brightened. As it grew brighter and brighter, it molded into three distinct columns of light. I watched in terrified fascination as the light faded to reveal

three very beautiful women dressed in gossamer gowns as pure and white as the moonlight. Each had long, voluminous hair that fell below their waists. Exotic, foreign jewelry was twisted into their tresses and decorated their pale throats and limbs. Their eyes were like jewels, hard, sparkling, and deep. Their skin was as pale as the moonlight. Lips red as the darkest wine smiled at me with secret smiles. Two were as dark and exotic in looks as the Prince. The third woman was blond and regal in her appearance.

I recognized them from my nightmare. Now I knew it was no mere dream.

My body began to shake violently as I stared at them. I knew now that father had been wrong. There were many things in this world that were not natural. These creatures were of a realm I had not known existed and they terrified me.

“Dearest sister,” the blond woman said softly in her musical voice, “as with every Bride, the time of your making by the Master has come.”

“You were in my room before. I thought it was a dream, but you were here, were you not?” My voice was tremulous. “Who are you?”

“My Brides,” a dark, deep familiar voice said.

The very sound of Prince Vlad’s voice made my knees buckle. Tears sprung once more to my raw eyes.

The shadows in the darkest corner of the chamber unfurled to reveal the dark image of a man. That horrible face emerged from the darkness as Prince Vlad stepped into the flickering firelight.

My terror rose and released my body from its frozen state. “No, please, no.” I stumbled backwards from him, my heart beating so violently it felt as if it would burst.

The Brides moved around me, their languid movements seductively graceful, yet menacing.

“The time has come for you to join my Brides, my love,” the Prince said in a low tone. His dark green eyes were burning with such intensity that they captured my very soul in an iron grip.

“No,” I moaned.

“You are most honored, my flame haired Bride.”

The Brides were whispering among themselves in a strange foreign tongue. One of the dark haired women reached out to caress my hair. I pulled away from her, alarmed, and stumbled into the arms of the blond woman. She pressed her cheek against mine and whispered, “Dearest sister, your lovely hair has brought you life instead of death. It enchants him. As does your beauty and your spirit.”

I pulled away from her. But Vlad was drawing near, driving me back toward the three women.

“What are you that you can appear from the shadows?” I cried out. I could not stop my shivering. I was so cold, so afraid. My teeth chattered. I hugged myself tightly. The Brides frightened me, but Vlad terrified me. The cold, soft hands of the Brides slid over my body. I twisted away from them and almost

fell. They gathered me up and pulled me into the midst of them.

I cried out in fear as their cold bodies pressed against mine. "What are you?"

"I am Vlad Tepish. Dracula. I am Immortal. I am a Prince. I am your new Master."

I again saw those sharp teeth behind his red lips, and I shrank back in fear. The Brides stroked my hair, my face, my arms, whispering to me, their lips sometimes brushing my skin. One of the brunettes softly kissed my cheek and spoke to me in a gentle voice.

"She says not to be afraid of us, for soon you shall be one of us," the blond woman translated.

Though I was shaking I tried to put my feet beneath me and stand my ground. I pushed my arms and hands outward, pushing them away from me. The Brides released me and stepped back as Vlad motioned them away from me.

"These are your sisters, my love. They will care for you as you change."

"I do not understand any of this!"

Vlad smiled ever so slyly. "You are mine forever, my dearest Glynis. I am giving you the gift of immortality. I am going to make you my Bride. A vampire."

"This is madness!"

In a panic, I ran to the window, my bare feet slipping on the stone floor. Instantly, the Brides were upon me. They seized me with their long fingers, pulling me back from the window. I almost fell as I spun away from them. Vlad caught me. I stared into his face in horror as he smiled, revealing those long fangs.

The blond Bride took hold of me and dragged me away from him. For a moment, I thought she intended to whisk me away, then the other two grabbed hold of me. With horror, I realized they were dragging me to the musty, old bed.

"No! Please, no! Please, no!" My shrieks filled the room as I fought against them, but they were obviously far more powerful.

The wolves outside began to howl. The Brides were strong and their grip sure. As much as I struggled, I could not break free. Tears were streaming down my face, but they took no notice.

The Brides dragged me onto the bed, managing to crawl across the covers like spiders, their movements bizarre and inhuman. They never lost their grip and maneuvered around me in a frightening ballet. The two dark haired Brides knelt at my sides while the blond bride knelt near my head.

"Come, my Master, the time has come," she said in a low, excited voice. Her eyes were sparkling and fever-bright as she combed my hair back from my face and neck with her fingers.

The other two Brides echoed her breathlessly in their foreign tongue.

"No!"

The fire flashed brilliantly, then died to low embers. The women clustered

around me, their long hair brushing over my body as their eyes burned like coals in the darkness. The Prince was nowhere to be seen. My eyes anxiously scanned the room for him, but he was gone. I sobbed with relief, hoping desperately that my unsaid prayers had been answered and he had fled.

To my absolute horror, he seemed to rise out of the very floor at the end of the bed to stand over us. He smiled his malevolent, seductive smile and rose onto the bed without moving one limb. With a burst of energy, I began to kick and twist about, thrashing about madly. The iron grip of the Brides would not give, and the Bride brushing my hair slapped me soundly. My head swam as I moaned in pain and fear. I could not bear to see Vlad crawling toward me with lust in his eyes. The Brides were whispering in madly soft voices, obviously urging him on. Their eyes, too, were wild and excited, their ruby lips pulled back from sharp glistening teeth.

Those teeth, those horrible, long, white teeth!

The Prince's long body was over mine and he tore his shirt from his chest. His long hair fell over his shoulder in long dark waves as his eyes burned with red fire.

"Now. Now is the time, dear Glynis."

I screamed at him and shut my eyes. The world seemed to explode around me, voices mingling with the howls of the wolves, shadows and fire playing against my closed eyelids. His long hair fell all around me as he pushed my nightgown over my thighs. I kept screaming "no" and refusing to look at him as I felt his hands sliding roughly over me.

"I had planned to seduce you, my little one, but you have forced me to take you this way," he said in a low voice, trying to kiss me.

I whipped my head back and forth, trying to evade him. This only made him angry and more determined.

When he entered me, an all-consuming pain erupted with me. He took me with such violent passion that my screams diminished all other sound. I twisted under him, but he gripped my waist tightly as I arched my back, crying out to my mother, my father, God and all the saints.

This was not how it was supposed to happen. I was to be seduced by Lord Byron in a fancy villa in Rome. It was to be beautiful and passionate. Not like this. Not this pain, this degradation. This horrible taking of my body and spirit.

His teeth descended into my neck with such savagery all other pain was drowned. I could feel nothing, but his teeth ripping into my throat. I struggled to get my hands free to push his horrible head away from my throat, but the strong hands of the Brides kept me prisoner. Their long sharp nails pierced my wrists, spilling more of my blood onto the bedclothes.

All I felt was pain, horrible excruciating pain. No matter how savagely I fought, his body continued to ride mine while his teeth penetrated more deeply. I could feel his mouth working hard against the wound, drinking in my blood, my

precious lifeblood. I could feel him drawing all of it deep into him as my limbs grew weaker and cold.

“That is enough!” The blond Bride shoved him back from my throat. “Take no more lest she die.”

Vlad lifted his head and snarled, but drew back over my body, still pressing deep into me. Blood was dripping from his mouth as he stared deep into my eyes.

“I told you, Glynis, you would be mine.”

He his laughter became a howl and the Brides cackled around me. The blond Bride leaned over me and drew her tongue over the throbbing wound in my throat.

I could not take my eyes from the horrible sight before me. Blood flowed freely from Vlad’s mouth, dripping down over his chest in long rivulets. He was laughing with delight, his long muscular body poised over me like some great bird. Throwing out his arms, he roared, “It has begun!”

The soft tongue of the blond Bride somehow soothed my torn throat and she raised her head, blood staining her mouth and chin.

“Oh, Master, sweet Master,” the Brides cooed as they reached out their hands to him. Timidly, they crawled to him, cooing and whispering, their eyes bright with an unholy hunger. One dark Bride slid her hands over his bloodied chest, then feverishly licked the blood from her fingers.

The blond Bride’s long pink tongue slid out beneath her sharp teeth to lick my blood from her lips. “We are so hungry.”

Vlad smiled at her and reached out to her. She crawled alongside my body to him. Taking her head between his hands, he guided her face to his chest. The trembling Bride licked at his chest with desperate need.

The third bride, her long black hair falling down around her, rose up and kissed his lips, taking as much blood as she could from his mouth.

I could barely breathe, my freed hand pressing against my throat. I could feel the wound, bloody and gaping beneath my fingers. He still had his body locked with mine, one hand holding my waist tightly. I had not the strength to twist away from him and free myself. My limbs were heavy and my spirit crushed.

Vlad pushed the dark-haired Bride from his lips and reached down to me. Taking hold of my shoulders, he drew me up to him, pressing my bared breasts against his chest. Holding me tightly with one arm, he began to thrust into me as the Brides continued to lick the blood from his pale skin.

“Release me,” I whispered. “Kill me.”

He laughed and drew one long, sharp fingernail against his thick bottom lip and drops of bright red blood appeared. “Oh, no, my dearest love, you are mine.”

Tucking his hand into my hair, he drew me up to his mouth and pressed his lips hard against mine in a dominating kiss. As I feebly struggled, I felt his blood

seeping through my tightly clamped lips. The sweet, yet bitter taste of his blood filled my mouth and burned my throat.

Abruptly, he dropped me back down onto the bed and began to laugh. Splayed out before him, I could not move as the room swam around me and my mind reeled as his blood seemed to burn like fire through me, yet turned my body cold.

The Brides gathered around him as he kissed them passionately, touching them, licking their bloody lips.

The room swirled around me and darkness rushed to swallow me up into a place where there was no pain.

Chapter 6

Letter

From Count Vlad Dracula

To Sir Stephen Sheridan

30th of June, 1819

My dearest friend,

It is my task to explain to you the unfortunate series of events that has befallen us. Your friend, Earl Wright, is dead. As is his family, save for his beloved daughter, Lady Glynis. Though his death has complicated matters, it was just. He was a most ungrateful guest and caused me great distress.

It is good that we decided to keep their visit secret from the world. Should anyone have known their destination, we may have become embroiled in a distressing investigation.

I have much to consider now that my plans have been altered. I still intend to move to England with my Bride, Glynis, but now, instead of joining my in-laws, I must plan another route to enter the English high society.

We shall meet soon.

Your Friend,

Dracula

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

15th of August, 1819

It is becoming more difficult to write in my journal without detection. The others seek me out and interrupt me at the most inopportune times. I must admit writing down all that has happened to me is difficult. I may not be the same English girl who arrived at the castle, but I am at times overwhelmed with

emotion. Upon writing of my rape and their first feast upon me, I found myself filled with rage and hid from them for three days. When I was finally found, I was beaten soundly, but it was a strange release. It is all the more reason to hate him.

I shall now recount the events that occurred after that terrible night in June.

Bright, harsh glaring sunlight pressed against my eyelids and forced me from my slumber. With my head throbbing painfully and my bruised body protesting every movement, I struggled to sit up in the giant bed.

“Oh, God,” I exclaimed in horror.

My nightgown and the bed were covered in dark brown stains of my blood. My body was sticky with dried blood and I whimpered as my hand felt the jagged wound cutting across the side of my neck. I started to crawl across the bed, and as my hands sank into the mattress, small pools of blood welled up beneath them.

“Oh, God, oh, God.”

Slowly, I lowered my legs over the edge of the bed. My thighs felt as if they were rubbed raw and my sex was a throbbing wound. Clutching my hands tightly in my lap, I tried to fight the pain that tore through my abdomen and neck. How could I lose so much blood and still be alive? My hair was caked with dried blood and plastered to my breasts. As I pulled my curls free from my body, I saw how pale my body was and cried out in fear.

I looked dead!

I began to scream long shrill screams, my whole body trembling. Within minutes, two young gypsy women rushed in, their dark eyes staring at me with fear. They took hold of my arms and pulled me from the bed. My legs had no strength in them, and I fell to the floor in an anguished heap of flesh.

“Please, don’t hurt me,” I begged.

The two women spoke in a strange tongue, then one of them disappeared out the door. The second woman crouched down beside me. A strange smile came over her face as she began to speak to me in her exotic tongue.

“I don’t understand.”

She pointed to one of my hands.

I looked down to see a ring on my finger that I had never seen before. It was gold with a dark, blood red ruby. The sight of it filled me with such disgust that I ripped it from my finger and flung it away. The gypsy rushed over to the sparkling ring and picked it up. Smiling, she tucked it into her blouse.

A towering swarthy giant of a man entered the room and moved toward me.

“No, no! Please, let me be! Go away! Go away!”

He plucked me up off the floor and I screamed in agony. Carrying me in his large hairy arms, the man took me to the room where I had been bathed the night before. Again, I was set down in the water of the large bath and the gypsy

women gathered around me. The water was warmer this morning and soothing to my skin. My clothes had to be peeled from my body and the fabric made a sickening sound as it was torn free from my flesh. I did not want strange hands to touch me after my violation, but I was too weak to fight.

Soon the water was brownish red and my far too pale skin was scrubbed clean. The giant pulled my naked body out of the water and I was frightfully embarrassed. He set me down in a chair and the gypsy women dressed me in a soft white gown. They were unusually timid and gentle with me. I noticed how they exchanged looks and I sensed fear in them. Once I was properly dressed, they sat me in front of a window.

It was painful to move. Every movement made sharp pains explode through my abdomen and legs. Once I was seated for a few minutes, the pain subsided enough that I felt I could unclench my hands and raise my chin.

A gypsy woman began to brush out my long damp hair as the sunlight poured through the window and warmed my flesh. I stared out over the lush valley below the castle. It was so beautiful it made tears come to my eyes. Somewhere, nestled in the great lovely forest was the village where my family would have found shelter.

My family!

I could not think of them without the pain in my heart being so great I could barely stand it. Where was Father now? I knew in my heart he was dead, but I wished desperately that he had somehow escaped with Mother and May. Oh, and my mother... To see her overcome with fear last night had been too horrible to endure. And sweet dear May, where was she? Had she suffered as I had last night at the hands of the Prince and his Brides? I could not bear the thought. May had never secretly kissed a boy in the closet of her parent's home or had the dreams of an illicit affair with Lord Byron. My friend, Mona, had told me that sex was painful after she had married, but surely this was the extreme. I felt as though I had been ripped apart. I could not even begin to comprehend how May could survive a similar attack.

Ilona, the old gypsy woman, entered the room, her craggy face staring at me disapprovingly.

"Time to eat, little girl," she said in thick English.

"Please, tell me, where is my family? Are they safe? Can I see them?"

Ilona ignored my queries and motioned to the gypsy girls. "Help her."

I was forced up out of the chair and made to walk between them. I shuddered with each step. They led me down long narrow corridors and down the steep staircase to the main hall below. Tears fell down my cheeks throughout the journey. I strained to see into every room we passed, but I never caught a glimpse of my family.

They led me through the doors into the dining room.

On the table a full meal was laid out. The food looked and smelled so

delicious; I actually felt hunger until my gaze was drawn across the table.

“No! No! No!” I fell to the floor. “Father! Father! Oh, God, Father! No!”

At the foot of the table, impaled on a huge golden ten-foot stake, was my beloved father. His face was frozen in a scream of terror and pain, his eyes bulging out, his mouth stretched wide in his death cry. His skin was a ghastly shade of blue and his body seemed shrunken, a mere husk of the man he had been.

“Take him down from there! Oh, please, take him down! It is hurting him!”

I was incoherent, overcome with grief and horror. I ripped at my hair with my hands as I rocked on the floor.

“It cannot hurt him. He is dead,” Ilona said.

“No! No! Please! Please!”

Ilona walked slowly down to the end of the table and gestured to a gold goblet on the table. “The Prince has offered you a choice. Would you like this or the meal we prepared for you?”

I could not take my eyes from the form of my father hanging on that stake. I could not even begin to understand Ilona’s words.

Ilona picked up the goblet from the table. Approaching me, she offered it me. “Drink this. Restore the life that was taken from you.”

I stared into the goblet and the dark, thick liquid within.

Blood!

I gagged and slapped it out of her hand. It spilled all over her gown, but the gypsy did not flinch.

“I see you are strong. Your rebirth will not be tonight, but it will be soon. You will fight it. I see it. You will not go peacefully into the grave to rise once more.” Ilona took a deep breath, then gestured to several men. “Take her to her sister as the Master ordered.”

“May! Where is she?”

This time I tried to walk as they led me up a series of staircases and down a long corridor before a door was opened for me. I was gruffly pushed into the room and the door slammed shut behind me.

“May! Where are you?”

“Glynis!” May crawled out from behind one of the huge, long trunks that were stored in the small room. “Oh, Glynis!”

I embraced her and tried hard not to cry out in pain as my slender little sister clung to me. I rocked her gently in my arms and kissed her forehead. Her pale face was smudged with dirt, and her fair hair was a tangled mess. She had been weeping, her eyes swollen.

“Oh, Glynis, I was so scared! After they brought us into the horrible place, I fainted. I don’t know where father and mother are! I woke up here alone! I am so frightened.”

“I’m here now, May,” I said. I was so relieved that May had not endured the

horror I had. "I am here now and I am going to try and protect you." I could not bear to tell her what I had seen in the dining room. I simply could not.

"I hate that horrible Prince! He's evil, Glynis! Truly evil!"

Slowly, the two of us sank to the floor and held each other tightly. We were both crying, trying in vain to comfort each other.

After a long while, we sank into silence as we huddled together. Sleep came to us, and we both fell into light, fitful slumber.

I wakened abruptly, and my movement drew May from her dreams.

A soft scraping noise came from one of the trunks.

"What is that?" I whispered.

"I think there are rats in those chests. I hear that noise every once in awhile." May clung to me, her frail body shivering.

I stared at the trunks, my fear resurfacing, then growing steadily. Determinedly, I stood. I moved to the closest one.

"There are three trunks," I murmured.

"Please, Glynis, the rat might bite you! It's so dark in here I cannot even see you!"

I looked sharply at May. I could see her clearly. The room was dark, but not so that I could not see everything around me. Then I realized that no light radiated from a candle or lamp. Barely a sliver of light seeped under the door.

"Please, Glynis. Come back. Don't stir up the rat. It may come after us."

"Please, May, be quiet," I said a little too sharply. My hands were shaking. "You might wake them."

"Who, Glynis? The rats?"

I grabbed hold of the edge of the lid of the trunk I was standing next to and took a deep breath. With all my strength, I slowly lifted it upwards. A cool breeze brushed against my face, and a faint, very sweet fragrance drifted up to me. Peering into the darkness within, I saw what secrets the trunks held.

"Is it a rat?"

I could see quite clearly that it was not. Instead, I was gazing upon the blond vampire. Her sapphire eyes were closed in slumber, her face smooth and serene. The dark red lips were slightly parted, the sharp teeth barely showing. Long slender hands were folded over her breasts, a ruby ring, identical to the one I had thrown away, sparkled in the darkness. The thick, rich golden curls filled the coffin, flowing over the voluptuous body and swirling around waist. I let go of the lid, and it slammed shut.

"Glynis? Glynis, what is it?"

Turning sharply, my body screaming in pain, I said, "We must be free of this place now."

"Glynis, what is in the trunk?" May's voice rose in pitch.

Stumbling across the floor, I looked about me desperate for anything I could use to pry open the door.

“Glynis, please answer me! I am so afraid,” May insisted, her voice trembling. “Please.”

“Get close to the door, May,” I ordered.

“You are scaring me!”

“May, please, get close to the door!”

I struggled to move, my body protesting, but I was determined. I found some rubbish in the corner and sorted through the rags. Slowly, I realized it was not rags, but clothing. Rotting clothing that reeked of dried blood. I tossed them away from me and hurried back to the door. Grabbing hold of the handle, I attempted to shake it open. I felt May's arms go about my waist as she clung to me.

“Glynis, I am so frightened. Why will you not tell me what is in the chests?”

I released the door, turning toward her. Her hair was mussed and it fell across her tear streaked face. I smoothed her hair back and kissed her brow gently. “I dare not. Just know that we must be free of this place. Help me with the door.”

Her hands joined mine and we strained, trying to somehow jar the door free of its hinges. It did not move.

“Stay here,” I whispered to May, moving on trembling legs to search the room.

It was quite small and empty save for the three chests. I returned to the chest where the fair haired vampire lay and rested my hand on the cover. I wondered if I could manage to wrench off the lid and use it somehow.

“Glynis, I cannot see you. Please come back to the door,” May called out softly.

I turned to see her clutching the door latch, straining to open it.

“I will in a moment. I think I have a plan,” I answered her.

I hesitated, then lifted the lid. It was quite heavy, but if I shoved it off the chest, I was sure I could manage to splinter it.

It fell back with a sharp bark. I tried hard not to look down at the beautiful woman still slumbering within.

“Please hurry back,” May's plaintive voice responded.

Before I could answer her, the woman's eyes snapped open. The sapphire eyes slid over and captured my gaze. I found that I could not speak. Slowly, she extended her hand out to me.

I do not know how I managed to break her gaze, and therefore free myself of her power, but I found myself turning and rushing to the door.

Completely panicked, I banged my hands against the door and tried to open it. May was caught up in my hysteria and joined me as the room echoed with our panicked cries. We pounded on the door begging for mercy, but none came.

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw the blond vampire standing in her chest. She shone like a jewel in the darkness, and I cried out in terror.

Beside me, May turned, but she could not see what I could. Yet, she must

have felt the menace. Her hands were bruised and her nails split from her desperate scrabbling at the door.

I had seen my father's dead body, and I knew not where my mother was. My throat tight with emotion as I moved to stand guard over my sister as she desperately jostled the door latch.

"Leave us be," I begged the blond woman.

"He has given her to us," she answered.

It took me a moment to realize the woman's lips had not parted when she spoke. Beside me, May tugged hard on the door latch, whimpering. She had not heard the woman speak.

"Leave us be," I repeated.

"Who are you speaking to?" May's voice was a bare whisper.

Elegantly and terrifyingly, the blond woman flew out of the crate to land lightly before me.

Shoving May hard behind me, I pressed my arms back trying to keep my sister protected.

With a languid smile, the golden haired vampire raised her hand and gently stroked my cheek.

"Who's there?" May's strangled voice cried out in terror.

"May, stay behind me," I ordered, slapping the blond woman's hand away.

She slightly recoiled, but her sly smile returned as she ran her fingertips lightly over my wounded throat.

"Glynis!" May screamed. "Glynis, answer me! Answer me!"

I could not move to comfort her. I was transfixed by those beguiling eyes.

"Glynis!"

I felt the cold hand take mine and I stared into the deep glowing embers of the vampire's eyes. She drew me away from the door, away from May, and I followed, unable to resist.

Night is falling over the valley. The sisters shall soon awaken.

"My sister," I whispered. "Don't hurt her!"

He has given her to us.

"Please," I begged. "Please."

"Who are you talking to?" May screamed. I could hear her languishing behind me, trying to find me in the darkness. "Why are you leaving me? Glynis!"

He has given her to us. To you. Do you not feel yourself changing?

I did feel different. Something was deeply wrong within me. It was as if a deep cold was spreading through me, stealing away the warmth of my human soul.

"I'm afraid," I said.

"Glynis!"

I felt May crawling nearer to me.

His blood is in you now. It is already spreading through you, changing you?

Don't you feel it?

"Yes, yes." Misery filled my voice.

I felt May clutch my skirt. "Glynis, who are you speaking to? You are frightening me!"

Her cries of terror seemed to be fading as my blood roared in my veins. I was changing. I was dangerous. Bending down, I gripped her arms tightly.

"May, you must hide! Hide now!"

"Glynis, please!"

"I love you, May, but hide! Now!"

"Glynis!"

She is for us. The voice was soft in my mind, but firm, hungry.

I was hungry, and May smelled sweet and delicious.

"May! Crawl away and hide! Please!" I shoved her away from me, turning back to the Bride.

You must join us and feast.

"I would rather die," I answered.

May was screaming and crying incoherently, seeking me out in the darkness. I could not stand the sound of her cries and tears slipped down my cheeks. The blond vampire's eyes softened and, suddenly, her grasp on my hand tightened. She slid effortlessly into the trunk and pulled me down with her. The lid shut with a loud boom as the vampire wrapped her arms tightly around me.

"The night has come," she whispered in my ear. "Our sisters awaken."

May found the trunk and beat at it with her hands. "Glynis, Glynis, Glynis, please come out! Where am I to hide? Why am I hiding? Glynis, Glynis! Let me hide with you!"

I reached out to shove the lid upwards, but I was restrained by the vampire.

"You cannot save her, my darling child. You are too weak to defend her against Ariana and Elina. Listen. They are rising."

I could hear the sound of the lids being shoved open with loud thundering clashes. May began to scream in terror and beat on the lid of the coffin.

"Glynis! Glynis!"

The soft murmuring voices of the other two Brides wafted through the darkness as May pounded on the lid of the trunk.

I struggled to free myself, to lift the lid to defend my sister, but I was too weak and the vampire held me firmly

"May, May, hide! May!"

May's terrified screams echoed through the room. I could hear the rustling movements of the other two vampires and knew they were coming for my sister. I could taste May's fear and it was delicious.

I wept.

"Hide, May, hide!"

But I knew it was in vain.

She screamed, then there was a loud thump as her body struck the trunk. The sly, delighted laughter of the dark Brides made me cry out.

“Stop them, please, stop them!” I fought the blond vampire, but she easily overwhelmed me.

“I cannot. Our husband has given her to us. It is his will. But I choose not to feed,” the blond vampire whispered to me. “And you will not bear witness to your sister’s death.” She clamped her hands over my ears and covered me with her body. It was later, when I saw her dress stained with blood that I realized she had kept my sister’s blood from falling onto me through the cracks in the lid. In a soft voice, she began to hum to me a sweet, sad tune.

I lay beneath her and cried. Though I cannot explain it, I found comfort in her touch. Somehow, I felt this beautiful, ethereal creature was trying to protect me from the horror of my sister’s death. And, strangely, I accepted this.

The sight of my dead father was still strong in my mind. That May would be spared that horrible death was a great relief. I knew May had fainted away and was oblivious of her fate. She was so frail her death would come quickly.

“Fly to heaven, May. Fly with the angels,” I whispered, crying in the arms of my new vampire sister.

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright - Continued

I have locked myself away and will refuse their invitations to join them. I shall write until I can write no more. Damn them all.

The night of my sister’s death, the wolves howled and the voices of the eternal night whispered in breathless anticipation as my sister’s life drained away. The only sound within the small chamber was the sweet humming of an ancient lullaby and the muffled slurping of rich, dark blood.

I lay in the arms of the blond vampire, listening to her hum, weeping, for I knew that I had lost my sister. I wanted to die and join her.

Abruptly, the door of the chamber slammed open. I felt Vlad Dracula's presence fill the room. I raised my head to peer through a crack in the trunk’s side. The torchlight from the hallway illuminated his face. It was clear that his eyes were not greeted with the gruesome sight he had anticipated. The frail body of my sister lay draped over one of the large trunks in the room. Her pale blue eyes were fluttering as death approached, her blanched face framed by the dark hair of the two dark Brides.

“What is this?” he shouted furiously.

One of the Brides, the one with the long curly hair, raised her head and hissed at him.

With a fierce expression, Vlad grabbed hold of the Bride and hurled her across the room. Frightened, the other Bride shrank away from him, her tongue licking her bloody lips.

“Mercy, Master, forgive our wrongs,” she said. “But we are so hungry. Did

you not give us the girl?"

"Where is Cneajna? And where is my new wife?"

I felt the brush of the blond vampire's hair as she too peered through the crack.

"He is angry. Let me take the brunt of his anger."

"We saw them not! Please, we are so hungry, Master," the dark haired Bride said, falling to her knees.

The second Bride crawled back into view, hissing softly.

"Glynis was to feed from the girl. This was to be her first kill." His voice was harsh, his eyes cruel. I could see that his anger was barely restrained.

Cneajna, for I now knew that to be her name, reached out one long hand and touched the crack. Suddenly, she seemed to simply slip through it, her body dissolving into vapor, then rapidly solidifying on the other side. "I feared for her sanity," she said. Her long pale hair fell about her like a golden cloak.

Vlad glared at her with harsh eyes. "Where is she? Where is Glynis?" His voice had taken on a dark menacing tone.

Cneajna raised her chin slightly. "She is not ready for her first kill. She is not yet as we are. I feared the madness would descend on her."

"Enough explanations! Where is she, Cneajna?"

Cneajna seemed about to defy him, but thought better of it. Her eyes slid to the trunk I was hiding within.

Clearly furious, Vlad viciously shoved her aside, striding swiftly toward the trunk. As he passed May's body, he flung it aside as if it were nothing more than a nuisance. With a low growl, the curly haired vampire scuttled across the floor and hunched over my sister hungrily.

I shrank back into a corner of the trunk, drawing my legs up to my chin, covering my face. Vlad wrenched the lid off the trunk and peered down at me. I cowered before him, trying to curl myself into a small ball. Trembling violently, I tried to avoid his gaze, cowering in the shadows.

"You were to feed," he said in a hard voice.

I hugged myself tightly, my lips quivering.

Cneajna humbly approached her angered husband and knelt before him. Taking hold of his hand, she stared up at him imploringly. "Please, Master, she is yet human, not fully changed. She would not feed. And her sister--"

Vlad slapped her so hard the sound of the impact made me jump. "Silence! I will not have you defying me! She was to feed on her sister. She was to join us tonight!"

"She is strong, Master. So very strong. She is yet mortal," Cneajna said through bloodied, swollen lips. "Please, you gave her to me to care for. Please do not allow the madness to take her from me. You promised me another child." She lowered her head in supplication, her hands held out to him.

Vlad's heavy brows knitted together over his green eyes. "Mortal! My blood

runs in her.”

I was wrenched to my feet and lifted out of the trunk. He gruffly took hold of my chin, forcing my head upwards. Searchingly, he stared into my eyes. With a snort, he dropped his hand.

“She is a strong one,” he decided almost with amusement. “She is still mortal. Changing, yes, but still mortal.”

“I told you, Master. When I saw her eyes, I knew she was not yet truly one of us. I saw her fear and realized our feeding could destroy her mind.” Cneajna climbed to her feet and moved to shield me from the view of Ariana and Elina feeding on May. “I was frightened, my Master. I know the importance of the new Bride, and I did not dare displease you by allowing her mind to be broken. Please, forgive me.”

Vlad studied her expression, then glanced at me, his newest acquisition. “Yes, you were right, Cneajna.” Then, with swift violence, he backhanded her, knocking her to the floor. “But never defy me again!”

Cneajna cowered at his feet. “Yes, Master.”

“Ariana! Elina!”

The two sisters rose to their feet. I dared not look upon the fallen form of my sister. Ariana, the curly haired one, wiped her bloodied lips with her hair, following Elina as though in a daze. Bowing their heads, they stood silently next to me.

“What do you wish, my Master?” It was Elina who spoke, the one with the long, straight, raven hair. Her lips shimmered with blood as she spoke.

“Prepare the girl. She must have the vampire baptism once more. Then she will join us. Take her to the bedchamber.” Vlad laid his hands on my shoulders, leaning toward me. I tried to avoid his lips, but they found mine in a crushing kiss. “Once more, my love.”

Fresh tears slipped from my eyes, racing down my pale cheeks. I simply could not endure to suffer his dark passions again.

Satisfied, Vlad whirled about and walked swiftly from the room.

Cneajna pushed her hair back from her face, regaining her composure. The ugly bruises that Vlad had inflicted on her face were rapidly healing. It was then I realized my own wounds from the night before were fading and the pain was bearable. Extending one long hand, she lifted my chin.

“Do not be afraid, dearest. I will care for you.”

Fearfully, I looked up into the face of my new mistress. I gazed into the exquisite eyes of the vampire and saw unexpected compassion dwelling within them. It gave me hope. “Please, please, let me go. Please, I want to flee from here.”

“Why does she beg to leave us? Is it the madness?” Ariana asked. She was the more delicate in appearance of the two dark Brides. I would later discover that when she had joined this dark world, she must not have been any more than

sixteen years old. The dark gift had endowed her with the sensuality and cunning of one much older. She had fine sweet features and dark curly hair. With her small white hand, she gently swept my hair from my face to look into my terrified eyes. “Will she go mad like Erzsébet?”

“No, it is her mortality fighting the change.” Elina stared at me with open animosity. “She will transform. She is nearly of our blood now. Look at how her eyes are changing. Those are not the eyes of a mortal. Soon our dear husband will have his new wife.” Her voice was tinged with anger.

Cneajna took hold of my arm, drawing me to her. “Come, my child, let us prepare you.”

I avoided glancing at May lying on the floor, her neck nothing more than bloodied flesh. “I cannot take anymore. Please, let me go. Please!” My voice was harsh to my own ears, ragged and full of terror. I collapsed onto the cold stone floor, weeping. Burying my face in my hands, I cowered before the Brides.

Cneajna leaned over me, her hair falling about me. “My dearest child, you are most honored to be a bride of Prince Vlad Dracula. He is the greatest of men. The pain will pass and you shall be one of us. The gift of immortal beauty and life shall be yours.”

“He hurt me! I felt as though I’d been split apart. My body does not feel right. I am so cold. Please, I do not want to die here. I cannot die this way.”

“But you won’t die. You will live forever as one of us. A vampire. A Bride.” Cneajna’s eyes were bright, her face pale and beautiful, and her teeth sharp and deadly.

I could not imagine being what she was. I stared into the vampire’s face in terror. The thought of living here in this place trapped with those who had murdered my father and sister was unbearable.

The dark Brides lifted me up with their cold hands as they encircled me, whispering promises of jewels, beauty, youth and immortality. They swayed around me, enfolding me in their embrace, their hands and hair brushing over me softly.

Cneajna took my face in her hands and her blood red lips pulled back into a smile, her fangs exposed and glistening. “Soon, you shall be my child, my daughter, my sweetest Glynis. I will be your mother, your sister, and your protector. I will teach you our ways. To dance, to sing, to feed, to hunt, to serve our dear husband.”

I closed my eyes tightly, swooning. I felt Ariana kiss my cheek as Elina slipped away to stand near the door. Cneajna lifted me up in her arms like a child and carried me from the room. My body grew colder as I was carried toward that horrible bedchamber. My head fell back from Cneajna’s shoulder and I noticed how frigid the air felt against my bare neck. Arms dangling, I had not the strength to lift them up. Peering through my eyelashes, I saw Ariana and Elina following close behind. Ariana was smiling, but Elina was staring at my exposed

neck with obvious longing.

Kill me, I thought. Kill me, Elina. Release me from this place.

But Elina did not make her killing move.

Cneajna turned into the darkened bedchamber and laid me down on the ancient bed. Flicking her hand, the candles next to the bed sprang to life. Ariana and Elina smoothed out my skirt and hair while Cneajna stood over them, smiling a satisfied smile.

At last, they deemed that I looked like an appropriate feast for their husband. The two dark Brides stepped back, disappearing into the shadows. Cneajna lingered behind, one cold hand pressed against my cheek. Staring down into my face, she smiled.

“Your time comes, my dearest child. Do not fear. Soon you will truly belong with us, and we shall spend eternity together. Sisters bound by blood. You will learn to love Vlad as we do, and then we shall be bound in our love for our husband.” She leaned over and kissed my lips lightly. “Sisters of darkness. Forever.”

The shadows seemed to swell up around Cneajna as she faded away. Alone, I lay in the great bed, weeping and pondering the strange woman’s words. Never had fear pressed down upon me as strongly as it did now. I had feared for my family, but now I feared for my very soul. I could not live an eternity in this place. I would rather die.

With all my strength, I pushed myself up. I crawled from the bed with great difficulty, then crept across the stone floor to the door. It was unlocked. My body was wracked with pain, but I forced myself to stumble on down the dimly lit corridor.

I had to escape this place. I had to escape the fate decided for me. I would not live here in eternal darkness with these horrible women and that fiendish Vlad Dracula. I was determined to escape.

Tears spilling down my face, I reached a crumbling stairwell that led upwards. Shivering from the cool air rushing down the stairs, I stared up into the darkness above me. Pressing my lips tightly together, I slowly climbed the stairs. My legs quivered from the strain, but as I turned a corner, I felt renewed strength.

The night sky in all its exquisite beauty stretched out before me. I stood atop a battlement. The dark Carpathian Mountains surrounded the castle like menacing sentinels. A chilly wind whirled around me, tossing my hair into a merry dance.

With grim determination, I moved toward the edge of the battlement and saw that this area of the castle was located near the sheer drop that fell to the river below. A small smile pressed itself onto my pale lips.

“Yes, this is how I should die.”

I stood barefoot at the edge staring below. I understood now what I must do.

The moon glinted off the waves of the river. The darkness that dwelt there was soft and velvety to my gaze. With a soft sigh, I prepared myself to fall.

“Do not do this!”

I whirled about to see Vlad step onto the roof. I stared at his fierce face, then a serene smile graced my lips as I let myself fall backwards. My feet slipped free of the stones as I plummeted into the wind. I could feel my hair whipping about me as I fell. I watched as the sky fell away. The sensation of the wind rushing up past me filled me with peace. Soon the cold waters of the dark river would swallow my body, and I would be free.

Death approached.

But it was not the death I yearned for.

Soft, strong arms encircled me and, to my horror, I heard Cneajna whisper my name.

Ariana appeared out of the night sky to hover over me. Reaching out, she took one of my hands.

My descent stopped.

“No, no! Let me fall! Let me fall!”

Elina floated into view, her dark eyes livid with anger. She seized hold of my other arm.

“Please, no! Please! Let me fall!”

Like three beautiful angels, the vampire Brides lifted me up. Their hair floating about them, their dresses billowing on the night air, they lifted me up to the waiting prince.

“Did you think you could escape me so easily?” he shouted at me as I was set down before him. His rage furrowed his face, his eyes glowing with dark fires.

“I only want death,” I sobbed.

“And that is what you shall have!”

Vlad grabbed hold of my hair, forcing my head back. The Brides encircled me and held me firmly as Vlad drove his fangs deep into my already ravaged throat. I screamed out in pain and fell back against the Brides, my hands trying to push him away. Viciously, he drank from me as the Brides pressed me against him. I struggled fiercely, but the vampires overwhelmed me.

As I felt the warmth of my blood flowing over my breasts and thighs, I ceased to struggle. A mysterious calm filled me and the pain faded away like vapor. Faintly, I felt Cneajna’s cold hands leave my shoulders and shove at Vlad’s head.

“Take no more. Her death approaches swiftly.”

I felt as though I no longer existed within my body. A strange buoyancy filled me. Then a most wondrous sight appeared. A light brighter than the sun exploded into existence behind Vlad. Its radiating warmth reached out to me. I knew it was the doorway to the freedom and peace that I sought. Out of that glorious light, May emerged. Illuminated with splendid brightness, May reached for me.

“May,” I whispered, transfixed by the vision of my sister.

“Stop now!” Cneajna’s voice was desperate. “Her heart grows weaker.”

Vlad reluctantly pulled back, his fangs stained with my dark blood.

May was beckoning to me, her sweet face full of compassion. “Come, Glynis, come to me. It is time to join Father.”

“I’m coming, May,” I whispered as I felt myself pulling free of my earthly body.

“Now! Do it now!” Cneajna cried out.

With his long nails, Vlad sliced his own throat and his thick vampire blood spewed forth.

The brilliant light was so lovely, so compelling, and May was so close now, I could almost touch her. I did not care anymore about Vlad or the Brides. I was almost home.

A fire erupted across my lips, flowing onto my tongue, down my throat, spreading like an icy current through my limbs. It was like being struck awake. I became sharply aware of my mouth being pressed against the gash in Vlad’s neck. I could feel his blood flowing into me and racing through my body. It was the ultimate penetration of my very being.

I thrashed about, but still the dark, fiery blood spilled into me. I beat Vlad with my hands as I writhed. To my amazement and relief, I managed to break free of the vampires. I ran toward May as I felt the blood-fire spreading through me, coursing in my veins, setting fire to my very soul.

With a stricken expression, the vision of May slowly dropped her hands as she began to glide back into the brilliance of the light.

“No, May! Don’t leave me behind! Please, May!”

The image of May collapsed in one bright searing blaze, disappearing into the dark Transylvanian night.

“No, May, please come back for me! May, please, please don’t leave me!” I screamed in anguish into the howling wind.

Behind me, Vlad said, “It is done.”

I whirled about, the wind swirling around me. My dark red hair was rapidly growing out about me, rushing over my body.

“What have you done to me?”

“Released you from life into living death. You have conquered your mortality. You are now one of us,” Vlad declared, his eyes glowing like cinders.

I threw back my head and pierced the night with my screams. Raising my hands upwards, I saw my nails growing out into pale daggers. I could feel long, sharp teeth sliding downward to press against my lips.

“No! No!”

The night churned about me as I was reborn.

“No!”

I fell back and the wind caught me up in its embrace. Floating above the

stone floor, I continued to scream as my body continued to transform. My skin became white as a lily as my body grew more voluptuous beneath my gossamer gown. My dark red tresses flowed around me like a living entity.

As suddenly as it had risen up, the wind died away and I fell to the roof. I lay there panting heavily. When I raised my eyes and I could see everything around me as clearly as the day, I knew that my eyes were no longer human. With my piercing new gaze, I looked upon the faces of my new vampire family.

“She has become,” Cneajna said.

“She is one of us,” Elina decided.

“Our sister,” Ariana said with a smile.

Vlad began to laugh fiendishly, until his voice rose into one long, piercing howl of victory. I lifted my head and screamed into the night as madness descended upon me.

Chapter 7

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

My vampire birth was violent and full of rage. Madness overwhelmed my senses, sending me spiraling into a world of delusions. My screams rent the night for hours as my body continued to transform.

Vlad carried me down into the bedchamber and hurled me into the room. Locking me in, he left me alone to suffer my rebirth.

Madness ruled my mind during those hours. I cannot remember exactly how or why I destroyed every bit of furniture in the room. I cannot remember how I managed to rip the door from its hinges, or how I came to be subdued by Cneajna.

It was the sudden awareness of the blond vampire holding me tightly and rocking me back and forth that finally brought clarity back to my mind. Confused, I stared down at my new vampire body. Every imperfection had been smoothed away and my skin was pale and flawless. My body felt strong, yet soft and my red tresses fell to my waist appearing more vibrant than ever before. Lifting my hands, I stared at the long, fierce nails shimmering in the light from the fire burning in the fireplace nearby.

Cneajna smoothed my hair back from my forehead and peered into my face. “There, you have come back to us. It is over now. The madness has fled.”

“I do not understand,” I stammered.

“Every vampire birth is different. Some of us simply die our mortal death and reawaken later as a vampire. That is how Ariana was born. Elina slowly transformed until one day she was no longer mortal. My birth was like yours. A sudden awakening into this world. It is overwhelming, is it not? I, too, bore witness to my rebirth. I, too, saw my body transform. I, too, suffered the

madness. But it passed. We are blessed that it did. Sometimes it does not pass. Then the vampire must be destroyed before it attacks those around it.” Cneajna smiled at me softly. “But that did not happen to you, my child.” She rose and walked over to a trunk in the corner of the room. She pulled a velvet cloak from it and laid it around my shoulders.

“I am no longer who I was, am I?”

“Oh, you are still Lady Glynis, but now you are immortal.”

“You are our sister now,” Elina said from where she stood at the far end of the room. She was staring out the windows across the great valley.

“You now belong here with us.”

I looked over to where the sweet voice of Ariana had come. In the shadows, I saw the dark little Bride lounging on a couch, her eyes reflecting the red fire in the fireplace.

“I do not belong here,” I exclaimed.

“Yes, you do. You are immortal now. A vampire. This is where we live.” Ariana languidly rolled over onto her back and stretched out her limbs. “This is where the Brides of Vlad Dracula live. And we,” she pointed at all of us individually, “are his Brides.”

“Just remember that we came here first. You do as we say,” Elina said firmly. Her gaze was sharp, verging on hostile.

“Elina,” Cneajna said in a low voice. “I will not have you intimidating our new sister.” She stirred the fire with a poker, her long hair golden in the firelight. “Glynis, this is our home. You are our sister. Vlad is now your husband. There are things you must accept. You are a vampire. You will live forever. With us. This is now your life.”

I tore my gaze from my transformed hands to the blond woman gazing at me. “I-this cannot be. I-I must be dreaming.” I sank down to my knees and pulled the cloak tightly around me. “I must be having a nightmare.”

Cneajna drew near. Tenderly, she took my face in her hands. “No, this is no dream. I am Cneajna, the First Bride of Vlad Tepes, Dracula. Therefore, I am the strongest, the oldest, and the most powerful.”

“Whatever she says, we must obey. She is our mother,” Ariana said.

Elina moved closer, casting a wary look upon me. “And I am the second Bride of our husband.”

“I am the third,” Ariana giggled.

“You are the last. Therefore, you are under us. You will do as we say.” Elina’s face looked fierce. “He chose us first. He was our husband first!”

“Elina!”

At Cneajna’s warning tone, Elina shrank back.

“I do not want anything to do with Vlad. I do not like him. I do not like this place. I hate it. I hate it! I hate all of this! I hate what you have done to me. To my family. I hate you. I hate all of you!”

Cneajna moved to comfort me, but I scrambled away. Climbing to my feet, I ran toward the nearest door. Elina suddenly stood before me, teeth bared. I darted toward another doorway. I felt something brush past me then Ariana appeared in my path. Frantic, I whirled about and ran toward the large window Elina had been standing before. I scrambled onto the ledge and stared down at the sheer drop.

“I will not stay here. I will not live in this hell,” I declared.

Cneajna laughed softly as she languidly sprawled across a couch. “There is no escape.

“I am going to jump!”

“Go ahead.” Cneajna looked bored.

I took a deep breath and flung myself out the window. My body was thrown up against an invisible wall and I was cast back into the room.

“You cannot escape. We are in the Master’s power. He does not wish us to leave the castle, therefore, we cannot. We are bound to him. He rules over our existence. He is our husband, our lover, our protector, our keeper. We cannot leave him. Ever.” Cneajna leaned down to look into my eyes. “We are bound to him by blood. His blood. We can never leave him unless he releases us.”

“We are prisoners!”

“His wives,” Cneajna corrected gently.

Ariana and Elina drew close to me, their eyes studying my every move.

I felt as though I was about to explode into a thousand pieces. The world overwhelmed my senses. Every emotion seemed to boil within me while every sensation of the flesh was intensified. The rage, the desperation, and utter fear I felt seemed as massive and dangerous as the mountains surrounding the castle. I struggled to keep focused when all I wanted to do was demolish everything around me, or lie down and die.

“I will not be his wife,” I said firmly. “I will get away from here.”

“You are his wife and there is no escape,” Elina answered.

Ariana knelt and took one of my hands. “Do you not wish to be here with us? Do you not wish to be our sister?”

“I would rather die!”

“Enough of this.” Cneajna grabbed hold of my chin with her strong hand. Her eyes bored into mine as she said, “This is your life now. You have no other. I am your vampire mother. You will do as I say. You have no choice.”

The power emanating from her overrode my senses and I swooned.

“Do you understand?”

I managed to nod.

Ariana clapped her hands, spinning about. “All is well.”

“Our time is coming to an end.” Elina motioned to the windows. “The night is dying.”

“Come, Glynis. It is time to sleep.”

Cneajna pulled me to my feet, holding me close to her. Ariana swayed toward the large door at the far end of the room and it opened at her silent beckoning. Elina followed her sister, casting one last hateful glance at me. Cneajna lead me out of the suite the sisters shared during the night and down the long corridors of the castle. I soon recognized the same portion of the castle May and I had explored together. When we reached the darkened stairway, I glanced toward Cneajna.

Her keen blue eyes sparkled brilliantly as she nodded. “Yes, it was I who rose when you came near to our resting place.”

I could not answer her. I was overcome with the memory of May’s and my simple little adventure. How foolish we had been. We had awakened a powerful evil and had not known.

As we descended the narrow spiraling staircase into the blackness below, I clung to Cneajna as an old childhood fear of monsters returned. I then realized that the only monsters were the three lovely women and, to my horror, me.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“To where we sleep during the hours of the sun,” Cneajna answered.

We entered a chapel and found Vlad waiting for us. A beautiful ornate coffin rested in the center of the chapel, its lid drawn back. Ariana wandered into a nearby tomb and I heard the sound of a coffin lid being slid into place. Elina seductively pressed her body up against Vlad, kissing him passionately. He smiled as he ran his hands over her body before gently pressing her away. Smiling coyly, Elina disappeared into another tomb.

The chapel dwelt in silence as the two remaining vampires turned to gaze at me. To me, who had been raised by an ardent Catholic, it seemed abhorrent that this once holy chapel now gave shelter to the vampires. It even seemed to pulsate with the evil that now slumbered there.

“See how lovely she has become, Cneajna,” Vlad said, his expression proud.

“Yes, my Master. She is far more beautiful than she was as a mortal. Truly a worthy Bride.”

Vlad held out his hand to his blond wife and she slipped her hand into his. He kissed her red lips and then her forehead as his malevolent eyes strayed to me. “Sleep, my love.”

Cneajna slipped from his embrace and disappeared into the blackness that enshrouded her tomb.

Vlad turned his attention to me. A sly, wicked smile formed on his thick lips. “Yes, you are truly worthy of me now.”

I raised my chin, glaring at him. “I loathe you.”

Vlad did not even seem to notice I had spoken. He motioned to the coffin resting on the floor. “This, my dear new wife, is yours.”

I felt my face become fierce as I snarled at him in anger.

“Is it not beautiful?”

“I will not sleep in it.” I stomped my foot. “I will not. You cannot make me. I am alive! I am not dead! I will not sleep in a coffin!”

“You are dead. Dead to who you were. You will sleep here in this coffin. It is our way.”

“No, not mine. It is not my way.” I turned away, ready to flee.

Vlad’s cold fingers wrapped around my arm and he held me firmly against him. “My dearest Glynis, you will obey me.”

“I will not,” I said through gritted teeth. “I am not dead. I will not sleep in that coffin.”

“Yes, you will.” Vlad flung me down into it. “You are a vampire. You are one of the undead.”

“No!” I tried to scramble out of the coffin, but Vlad struck me so hard with the back of his hand it felt as though my head would rupture.

“You are no longer mortal. You are a vampire. You will act as such.” His fangs glistened as he spat the words out at me. Angrily, he lifted up the coffin lid and slid it onto the coffin.

“No, please, no!”

The last thing I saw before the lid slid shut over me was his fiendishly smiling face, then I was plunged into darkness. As I screamed in terror and anger, I heard him walk away chuckling. I knew where he was going, and I screamed at the horror of it all. I had seen the tomb where he lay during the day and the one word written over it:

DRACULA

Chapter 8

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

How miserable it is to write of my first nights here. I can scarcely believe the words I am writing and yet, this is my story. My life. It is all I have endured in this place. It is my truth and I shall speak it, even if it is only to this little battered journal.

They continue to torment me. They demand of me all sorts of horrors. I refuse to give in. How much longer I can deny my new nature, I do not know. I hope at times that I will go mad so they will slay me.

But where was I? Oh, yes. My first night as a true vampire...

I awoke. I found myself in utter darkness. Like a rushing wind, the memory of the night before came vividly to my mind. My hands impacted with the lid of the coffin, and I could feel my long nails scraping against the wood.

“Let me out! Release me!”

The lid drew back, and Cneajna stared down at me with her beguiling eyes. “Come.”

I sat up to find myself surrounded by the vampires. Vlad stood at the end of my coffin bearing a lantern, its light illuminating his dark features.

“Do you feel the call of the night?”

His words were meaningless. “I feel nothing.” I slowly stood up, the heavy cloak of my hair falling down my back. I told no lie to Vlad. I truly felt nothing. Just deadness within. A strange, forlorn deadness.

“She still thinks she is mortal,” Elina scoffed.

Vlad drew near to me and gently lifted my face. “Do you feel the hunger?”

I pulled away from his grasp, gingerly stepping out of the coffin. I ignored his question, concentrating on the strange appearance of my body. I felt detached from my own flesh.

Cneajna took hold of my shoulder. “Glynis, what do you feel?”

“I told you. Nothing.”

“It is not yet time.” Vlad snorted contemptuously. He turned on his heel and swept out of the decaying chapel.

“What a weakling vampire,” Elina said with scorn before following her Master.

“It will come soon,” Ariana said with a smile.

I realized she was trying to console me. I did not know what they spoke of and did not care. I actually did not care about anything at all. I just felt so completely dead.

“I do not like this,” Cneajna said. She pensively studied my features. “The hunger should be consuming her.”

“I thought you said that every vampire birth is different,” Ariana reminded her.

I did not pay much heed to the two vampire women conversing close to me. I absently wandered around the chapel studying my ghastly surroundings. My long red hair trailed down my back like a red robe. A sharp thought flashed through my numbed mind. I turned toward them.

“I will not drink blood,” I stated.

Cneajna cast a dark look toward me. “What did you say?”

“I will not drink blood.” I felt quite defiant, and my voice reflected that energy. I looked away, my eyes glistening with sudden tears. Slowly, the numbness was dying. The deep pain of losing all that I had held dear was once more beginning to ache within my cold body. “I understand now what you have done to me. You have killed me and damned me to this place. But I will not drink the blood of others. You cannot make me and I will not. I would rather die.”

Cneajna seemed slightly unnerved by my quickly shifting moods. “Of course you will feed. You are a vampire. It is our way.”

“Not my way. I did not choose this life. I do not want it.”

“Oh, but you will feed. The hunger will come, and you will feed.”

“You cannot force me!” I shouted at her.

Cneajna drew herself up, haughtily regarding me. “I will not have to. The hunger will come and you will feed.”

“No, I will not!” I snatched the lid off the coffin that had imprisoned me and held it over my head. “And I will not sleep in this coffin! I am not dead! Do you hear me! I am not dead!”

“You are a vampire.”

With a shriek of rage at Cneajna’s words, I brought the coffin lid down. With furious blows, I reduced the ornate coffin to splinters in a matter of seconds.

Ariana cowered behind Cneajna, her eyes wide and frightened. “Is it the madness?”

“No, worse,” Cneajna answered.

“What is worse than madness?”

I whirled on them and stared at Cneajna, my chest heaving, my eyes wild.

Cneajna tilted her head as she gazed at me, slowly stroking Ariana’s hair.

“One who fights the hunger.”

I hissed at them and fled.

I raced through the corridors of the castle, a rage burning so intensely I felt as if it would consume me. My long red hair trailed behind me, my skirts flaring out around legs. I ran blindly, crashing through doors, toppling furniture, and leaping down stairs.

Beyond the castle walls, the howling of the wolves pierced the night and joined my screams of fury.

Slamming through a doorway, I found myself in the cavernous kitchens of the castle. Several gypsies sat at a table eating their supper. One of the women screamed when she saw me. That old shrew Ilona rose hesitantly to her feet.

“What do you want here?” Her voice quivered.

At the time, I did not realize how frightening my appearance was to the servants with my long nails, fierce eyes, and wild expression. I was also oblivious to the fact that my long teeth were visible behind my red lips. I had yet to comprehend how truly frightening my visage can be.

“I am hungry,” I responded truthfully. I was hungry. Famished.

One of the gypsy men ran out of the room in fright. My eyes followed him. I was tempted to follow, but I was uncertain as to why. This was the kitchen. Food was here. I returned my gaze to Ilona.

“The Master...the Master...” Ilona took a deep breath. “Did the Master send you to us?”

I moved toward her, watching her every movement, fascinated by the sight of her chest rising and falling so swiftly. “No, he did not.”

“Then, perhaps, you should leave,” Ilona suggested.

“No.” I stared at the swarthy faces of the frightened gypsies. I was so hungry that the hollowness within me was calling out to be filled. With one taloned hand, I reached out, plucking a wine goblet from the table.

One of the gypsy women crossed herself as one of the men grabbed a heavy knife from the table.

I lifted the goblet to my lips and drank in the wine with large gulps. The red liquid spilled down my chin, staining my white gown. With trembling fingers, I began to tear at the roasted meat set on the table. Shoving great pieces of meat into my mouth, I ate ravenously. Shredding a loaf of bread, I gazed at Ilona. Staring at her only made me hungrier.

“Call the Master,” Ilona whispered to a young man beside her.

Stuffing chunks of bread into my mouth, I grabbed up a bottle from the table. Desperately hungry, I moved down the table swallowing down morsels of food and gulping down the wine.

The firelight caught in the dark eyes of the gypsies anxiously watching me. I was mesmerized by them and reached out to one of the women. The girl shrieked, falling back against the wall.

“I am so hungry,” I whispered. “Is there more food?”

“It is not food you desire,” Ilona responded in a soft voice.

Sluggishly, her words registered in my mind. With a growing sense of horror, I realized her words were true. My eyes widened as crumbs of food fell from my slack mouth. The bottle of wine crashed to the floor, shattering into tiny shards.

“What are you doing?” Cneajna hurled herself into the room and caught me up. “You cannot eat these things!”

I staggered backwards. “I am hungry.”

“Not for these things! Did you drink the wine?”

“Yes.”

“Good, then your body will be able to accept what you have forced into it. Consuming food will weaken you. Thankfully, you are newly made.” Cneajna grabbed hold of me, pulling me from the table. “If Vlad knew what you have done-“

“I do know.” He stormed across the stone floor, lifting his hand high above his head.

I was so stunned to see him I did not react until he dealt me a powerful blow with the back of his hand.

“I give you the dark gift and you do this?” Grabbing hold of my long hair, he wrenched my head upwards.

“Mercy on her, Master! Mercy! She does not understand,” Cneajna exclaimed.

“Do not defy me, Cneajna!” He bared his long fangs at her, his eyes glowing with anger. Returning his gaze to me, he said, “Do not defile your body with this mortal food again. You are a vampire!”

I felt cold tears coursing down my face as I stared up into the face of the monster that claimed to be my Master. I could not comprehend his words. They were twisted and strange to my ears. All I could fully understand was my absolute despair and desperate desire to be far from this place. And the hunger, the awful, tearing, consuming hunger.

Vlad grabbed my face with one hand, squeezing it fiercely, his long nails digging into my cheeks. “Do you understand my words, dear wife? Do you understand?”

“I do not want to be in this place,” I cried out.

Snarling at me, his face twisted with his rage. He pulled me across the floor by my hair, then slammed me into the wall. “You are my wife. You will not leave this place. You are my Bride and you will feed!”

The cold stones of the wall pressed against my cheek as I fell against it, my strength gone.

“Do not turn your face from me!”

“Mercy on her, Master!”

“Silence, Cneajna! Do you hear me, Glynis?”

I could feel his anger pressing against my back as I hid my face against the wall.

“I will not be ignored!” Vlad struck me again, this time across the back of my head.

I fell to the floor, my hair splayed out around me.

“Mercy! Please, give her mercy! She is young and foolish! She-“

Cneajna was cut off by a furious blow across her face.

“Silence! Do not defy me!” He turned back to me and kicked me brutally in the ribs. When I did not respond, he howled.

Instinctively, fearing the next assault, I began to crawl away from him, my hands sliding across the stones. Breathing heavily, tears blinding my eyes, I scrambled desperately away from my tormentor.

To my surprise, I heard Vlad began to laugh with delight. I blinked my tears from my eyes and dared to look over my shoulder. To my shock, I was staring down at Vlad and Cneajna. Both vampires were gazing up at me with vastly different expressions.

Vlad was definitely delighted.

“Yes! Excellent! Look at yourself! Yes, this is much better! Much better!” Vlad continued to chuckle, his anger gone.

Still bemused by the whole situation, he sauntered from the kitchen, his laughter trailing behind him.

I could not believe I was clinging to the wall like some miserable insect. How I had accomplished such a feat was beyond me.

“His anger is spent. Come down, Glynis,” Cneajna said in a soft, tired voice.

I hung on the wall, staring about in wonder and fear. “I do not think I know

how to come down.”

“Come down as you went up.” Cneajna wearily pushed her heavy hair back from her face. “Come down now, Glynis.”

Hesitantly, I began to push my body downward. When my foot touched the floor, I backed away from the wall with an awed expression.

“Is this what I am? A creature that climbs walls like a spider?”

“You are a vampire, my dearest.”

I whirled about and stared at the cowering servants standing behind Ilona.

“And these creatures. What are they? Our food?”

“Our servants. We do not touch them.”

I raised my hands. My nails had broken off from their original length, but they still looked sharp and deadly. “If I am to feed, then who?”

“Our Master will pick your first kill.”

“But who?”

Cneajna averted her eyes.

I stared down at my hands, then felt my face. The cuts and bruises that should have been there from Vlad’s brutal blows were not. Awestruck by my transformation, my eyes grew large with wonder that slowly turned to horror.

“Who, Cneajna?”

“It is Vlad’s choice. You will feed soon. You cannot escape it.”

“He wanted me to feed on May...” I could not take the thought further. I still did not know where my mother was. “Oh, God! What have I become!” I turned and ran.

“Glynis, where are you going?”

I did not answer but once more took flight across the cold stone floors.

Racing from room to room, I explored the castle with great anxiety. Where was my mother? What had happened to her? Was she also now in Heaven? Or could she still be in this horrible castle? Alive? Waiting...waiting...Perhaps waiting for me. Was my own mother to be my first kill?

Abruptly, out of the shadows, Ariana appeared, dressed in a fine gown, her hair caught up with jewels of brilliant colors. With a merry laugh, both sweet and beguiling, she caught me in her arms and danced me about. I pulled free from her and stared at her with great suspicion.

“What do you want?”

“You are my sister,” Ariana said. Her eyes sparkled like jewels and I wondered if my eyes glittered as hers did. “Do you not want to dance and play with me?”

“You are not my sister,” I said tersely. “My sister’s name was May and she is dead. You killed her.”

“Oh, yes, I did, did I not?” She laughed softly then said, “But I am dead and your sister. So it is very much the same, is it not?”

“No, it is not. You are not my sister.”

“I am your sister by blood. Vlad’s blood.” She laughed gaily and kissed my cheek with her very red lips. She twirled about, her long skirts flaring out about her legs, her fingers tracing delicate designs in the air. “We are sisters forever.”

“Get away from me!”

Ariana just giggled girlishly and whirled around me. As quickly as she had appeared, she vanished.

Deeply disturbed and quite angry, I walked on, much more slowly now. I could see so very clearly every line and detail of the walls, floors and all the tattered furnishings.

My wanderings finally led me into a cavernous chamber. Dust coated the floor and to my wonderment, as I walked I left not a trace of my passing.

Beyond tattered curtains, the night sky, dark as velvet, called to me.

Slipping onto the ancient balcony, I felt the wind caress my vampire flesh. The night felt different to me now. It was so peaceful, so silent. The stars shone so brightly that my gaze was drawn upwards. The moon was hidden behind the softness of dark gray clouds and I sorely missed its tranquil celestial beauty.

The night comforted my soul, soothing away my anxiety. I lowered myself down and sat by the railing, feeling the soft kisses of the wind on my flesh.

Tipping my head back, I watched the lazy flight of the night clouds across the panorama of burning stars. I felt who I had once been dying within me. Like a voice echoing in a vast dark cavern slowly fading into eternity, Lady Glynis Wright of England was also fading. I felt it so strongly it moved me to tears.

There was no real innocence left in this body anymore. Vlad had stolen my virginity with a violence I had never conceived of and had taken my blood with a foul, obscene lust.

I shuddered at the memory.

Vlad had ripped away my family and, in the end, my very humanity. The childish dreams I had held so dear of a romantic, illicit, adventurous life were now dead. Gone like Father and May. Dead to this strange, horrible, wondrous new world in which I now dwelt.

Soft whispers floated in the wind, soft and beguiling. I cocked my head to listen, tears glimmering on my cheeks. Sensing that something or someone was watching me I slowly stood. Peering over the edge of the crumbling railing, I beheld the dark forms of a pack of wolves sitting far below. Their bright, glowing eyes gazed up at me. A large gray beast suddenly howled long and strong and one by one, the other wolves joined in until their dark music filled the night.

“They welcome you. You are now a creature of the night.”

I turned around to see Cneajna emerging from the blackness of the room behind us.

“I have been searching for you, Glynis. You have been gone for some time. The sun rises soon.”

“I have not been here that long, have I?”

“Consumed in your dark thoughts, were you? Then time passed you quickly.” She moved past me to the railing, her movements slow and sensuous. “How do you feel now? Hungry?”

“No. Dead.”

“Then all is as it should be.”

Cneajna was so beautiful she made me feel like an ugly little girl. Her lips were full and well-defined, her nose narrow and authoritative, and her sapphire eyes large and radiant. Staring into her face and truly taking in her features for the first time, I realized that this woman must have crossed over into the vampire world at a much older age than the other two Brides or me. Though she appeared very youthful, the maturity of an older woman was drawn into the delicate lines of her face.

“I was older than you,” she answered my unspoken question. “I was thirty-two years old. I did not have any children. My womb remained empty throughout my married life. That is why Vlad gives me the care of his Brides. To allow me children in this world where I did not have any in the mortal world.”

“I have a mother,” I stated.

Cneajna’s jaw set, but she did not respond. She raised her head to breathe in the scents of the night.

I stared down at the wolves for a long moment. “We are like them. We are a pack of predators seeking out the weak.”

Cneajna stood quite close to me. Her eyes did not rest on the wolves though, but on me. With a fine hand, she touched my shoulder. “Yes, we are.”

“Why am I not hungry?”

“He has dulled the power of the hunger.”

“So I will be ravenous when I do feed?”

“Yes.”

“When am I to feed?”

“Soon. Tomorrow night, I think.”

“If I refuse?”

“You will go slowly mad until the hunger consumes you. Then you will feed.”

“I see.” I pondered her words. “Then I will go mad.”

Cneajna grabbed hold of my arm. “Do not defy Vlad. He will destroy you if he desires.”

“I wish he would!”

“Perhaps that would be best.” Elina emerged from doorway, dark and threatening.

“Elina,” Cneajna said in a low, warning voice. “Our time is at an end. We should go down to the chapel soon.”

“Because of you we did not feed tonight,” Elina said to me. Her eyes flashed

fiercely and her teeth snapped together.

“Silence, Elina!”

I felt Cneajna’s power rush past me and over Elina. The dark haired Bride shivered and bowed her head.

“I will not feed. I will not!” I stomped my foot.

“You are such a weakling. I cannot understand why he wanted you.” Elina sneered at me, her pretty face twisting into a mask of loathing.

“I wish he had not wanted me. I wish it with all my heart!”

Elina began to retort but Cneajna gave her such a fierce look she dared not continue. She shrank back a few steps.

“Come, Glynis.” Cneajna grasped hold of my hand. With a piercing look at Elina, she led me away from the balcony and the glory of the night.

Pondering all that had happened, I let Cneajna guide me through the gloomy castle. The heartbeats of the gypsy servants were faint. Evidently they did not enter the crumbling corridors of this wing of the decrepit castle. Perhaps it was the coming of the day, but I felt tired and dazed. The pulsing, growing need that I had tasted earlier that night frightened me more than any shadow filled room.

When we entered the chapel, Vlad was waiting for us. Ariana was clinging to him and rubbing her face against his long, dark tresses. At his feet lay the remains of the coffin he had given me. His dark brows knitted together over his stormy green eyes.

“Why did you do this?”

“I am not dead,” I answered.

“Where will you sleep?” He raised an eyebrow. “On the floor like a dog?”

“With me. There is room.” Cneajna pulled me toward her tomb.

“Cneajna,” Vlad purred, his long hand catching hold of her slender neck as she tried to pass by him.

Her eyes slid toward him. “Yes, my Master.”

“Beware.” A menacing smile graced his thick lips beneath his heavy mustache. “I do not like to be defied.”

As his hand released her, Cneajna pulled me along, escaping the scathing sneer of our Master.

We entered the blond Bride’s tomb, which was far more beautiful in design than those of the other Brides. A large coffin lay on the floor, its heavy lid drawn back. Cneajna released my hand as she sealed the door. The candles burning in their holders along the walls were beginning to waver, casting flickering shadows about the tomb.

“Come, lay down.” She lowered herself into the coffin, sliding to one side. “Come lay down. You must sleep.”

Feeling awkward, I hesitantly climbed into the coffin. Lying down next to Cneajna felt so odd. I felt so small and helpless even though I knew I was neither one of those things anymore.

Solemnly, Cneajna reached up one hand to pull the lid over us.

“Please, do not,” I pleaded.

She seemed about to ignore my request, but lowered her hand. “Very well.”

I lay on my back, my hands folded over my stomach, staring up at the flickering light undulating across the ceiling. Cneajna rested on her side, one hand tucked under her golden head. I could feel her staring at me and it unnerved me immensely. I could not even begin to imagine what thoughts were floating through the vampire’s mind.

Cneajna lifted herself up on one elbow and stared down at me. “You are my daughter now. I will care for you as your mother would have. I will do your hair and give you many beautiful dresses. I have many jewels and I will share them with you. I will teach you our ways. The way to dance, to fly, to hunt, and to serve our husband. I will care for you, my sweetest child, I promise.

I stared up at the lovely woman with the sparkling sapphire eyes, ruby lips and hair of spun gold. Cneajna was by far the most beautiful creature I had ever seen, but also one of the most deadly. I could see the absolute horrible longing in her eyes and the terrible desperation within her to have the family she had been denied in her mortal life. I could feel her pain pouring out of her and her need to be my vampire mother. But this vampire world had not claimed my soul yet.

“I have a mother,” I said shortly, deliberately shutting my eyes to avoid her wounded expression. “I do not need another.”

There was a horrible silence. I could feel Cneajna’s anger beating down on me.

“Very well,” she finally whispered.

I could feel her lay back down beside me, the long golden tresses falling around us like a blanket. Then there was a loud scraping noise and the coffin lid shut over us.

“You will learn to love the darkness,” Cneajna whispered tersely to cut off my protest. “And you will learn to love us.”

Chapter 9

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright Continued

I awoke burning with the hunger.

My screams rang through the crumbling remains of the chapel and the long corridor beyond. Prince Vlad emerged from the darkness into the torchlight and stood over me. A dark smile formed under his thick mustache and within the depths of his green eyes glimmered red fires.

Wolves entered the chapel, their long nails clicking across the stone floor. The pack leader bowed his head to Vlad, and Vlad tipped his head in

acknowledgment of this homage.

Elina appeared in the doorway of Cneajna's tomb as Ariana joined her.

“The hunger,” Ariana said softly.

“The madness,” Elina corrected.

Prince Vlad smiled as I sat at his feet, tearing at my hair, screaming, only seeing, but not comprehending all that was around me. Cneajna stood over me, long claw marks raked across her face and neck. Slowly, she moved to stand before me at Vlad’s side.

In my terror, I briefly remembered tearing at her face before escaping her coffin.

She gazed down at me, then said, “It has begun.”

Vlad’s smile broadened as his wives gathered around me. I scampered and fled into the chapel. He followed and found me huddled in the corner of the room. I was violently shaking beneath the tangled mass of my hair.

“My love?”

I spun about and hissed at him threateningly. My aquamarine eyes felt wide and they burned as I raged at him. My nails were long and sharp, like rapiers, and I felt the deadly points of my fangs against my lips.

Vlad laughed with utter delight. “You are becoming.”

Throwing back my head, I shrieked with the pain of the hunger.

Drawing a knife from his belt, Vlad drew the edge against his wrist. “Come, little one. Come and have a little taste of the coming feast.”

The dark droplets of blood caught my gaze and with feverish yearning, I reached out to him. My tongue snaked out from beneath my glistening fangs and licked the blood running from his fingers. My rabid mind only hungered as my mouth fastened to the wound and I drank. Vlad stroked my red tresses gently with his other hand as I fed. I could not feel anything beyond the desperate need to drink.

“Just a simple taste to hold off the madness,” he whispered to me.

It grows harder and harder to write my story. To realize that there was never any hope of escape from this madness only fuels my anger and resolve.

After Vlad fed me his blood, I fell into a stupor. Vlad lifted me into his arms and carried me to the chamber of the Brides.

The world was fluid, spinning around, shadows and light dancing about me. All I could hear was the sluggish beating of my pounding heart in my ears and the soft whispering voices of the shadows. I tasted blood on my lips and tongue and it was so sweet, so delicious.

All the images around me were disfigured, as if I was peering at the world through a crystal goblet. As the Brides of Dracula shifted about me, their hands moving over me and about my face, I became aware of their presence.

Ilona was wielding a large knife and Ariana was carrying away lengths of red

fabric...no...hair. My hair. They were cutting my hair. And I was naked..no... they were dressing me in a fine, soft dress.

“Do you understand my words?” Cneajna asked softly, her distorted features swimming into view.

I did not answer, but stared at the dog lying at my feet. Did I own a dog? No, it was not a dog. It was a great gray wolf.

“Hello,” I whispered to the great beast.

“Why is she so drunken?” Elina’s voice pierced through my fuzzy thoughts.

“The Master’s blood took the edge off her hunger by clouding her mind.”

Ilona’s face disappeared into the shadows.

Interesting.

The wolf sat up and rested his great head on my naked knee. I stared down into his dark eyes and felt his great presence filling the room.

Why was this dangerous predator among us?

Oh, yes, we were all predators in this room.

Vampires and wolves.

All except Ilona.

Ah, Ilona.

I whirled about in my chair and stared into the frightened gypsy’s eyes. She froze, the brush she held in one hand suspended in midair. Those dark eyes surrounded by countless wrinkles were bound tightly to my gaze.

“Glynis, do not do this,” Cneajna whispered.

“Am I beautiful?” My voice floated softly on the night breeze.

The wolf raised his ears and growled deep in his throat.

“Very. Like an angel,” Ilona responded, her voice a soft monotone.

“Are my cheeks not rosy, so soft, like a rose?”

“Like a child’s.” Ilona’s hand was shaking violently but she could not tear her gaze from mine.

“Would you like to kiss my cheek? Like a mother kisses her child. Do you wish to kiss me?”

“Oh, yes!” Bright tears were glistening in Ilona’s eyes.

“Stop it now!” Cneajna’s voice was sharp.

I knew my eyes were glowing with my unholy lust in the flickering candlelight. “Kiss me.”

The gypsy woman began to bend down.

Elina stepped between us and slapped Ilona soundly, knocking her out of her trance. “Idiot woman!”

Ilona cried out in fright. Dropping the heavy brush, she darted from the room.

I growled furiously. How dare Elina frighten my prey away!

Cneajna grabbed hold of my chin and pulled my face to one side. I stared at her with fierce intensity.

“You are never to touch the servants. I know you are drunk with the hunger,

but you must always remember this.”

I sighed. Everyone was spoiling my fun, and I was so hungry. I just wished they would stop playing with my clothes and hair and let me be. But to do what?

A smile caressed my lips.

Oh, yes, to feed.

The Journal of Lady Antoinetta

The Castle Dungeon

June 16th

I have sat here in this filth for days now. I am disgusted by my condition, but I am a prisoner and I am to suffer all that entails. May God curse Prince Vlad for all his evil!

The days are unbearable. The nights are worse. I hear screams in the night that terrify me. They sound like the voice of my daughter, my lovely headstrong Glynis.

My beloved Edric is dead. I recall all too vividly his death. How his blood fell on me like rain. I fear that May, too, is dead. I find myself praying that the monstrous master of this castle will kill me and let my soul be free.

That he allows me to write letters home and write in my journal is nothing more than another cruelty to bestow upon me. I know my letters to Andrew will go unread. At times, I find myself hoping desperately that Glynis will be able to take them to my son, but I know that is the wild hope of a doomed woman. I stare at my little stack of letters and want to weep.

I miss my beloved Andrew and his precious wife. I will never see their children. I know this and it breaks my heart.

May Prince Vlad burn in hell for what he has done to us!

So why now, after these horrible last days, do I pick up my pen and write in my journal?

It is because he brought her to me.

As the dungeon door swung open on rusted hinges, I rose up from where I had been seated on the filthy floor. Light pierced through the blackness of the cell. I drew upon some inner strength and lifted my chin, my hands smoothing out my dirty skirt.

After all, I am a Countess.

The lantern raised and revealed the sharp angular features of Prince Vlad Dracula. “It is I, madam.”

My stomach coiled into a tight knot. Was this then the time of my death? Had I waited here these last horrible days in this dreadful place tormented by the memory of my dear husband’s demise, fearing for my daughters, to only face death now? Well, if that was the truth, I would face it. To be released from this place even if it also means to be released from my earthly shell, so be it. I cannot endure this hell any longer.

“Why are you here?”

My voice was so calm.

Remarkable.

Prince Vlad seemed amused that even here in this dismal, filthy hole I still retained my dignity.

“You look well.”

“That is not an answer to my question,” I snapped at him.

Those too-red lips just pulled into a sinister smile. “I brought you a visitor.”

“May,” I whispered with hope.

“Oh, she is dead and gone,” Prince Vlad answered casually.

I clasped my hands over my heart and took hold of my rosary. I kissed it softly and raised my tear filled eyes. “May you burn in hell, sir. May you burn in hell!”

He laughed at my curse.

“You are a monster!” I held my tiny little crucifix in my hand and felt it warm against my fingers. I had noticed how he kept back from it, so I now raised it in his direction. I saw him flinch, and I laughed at him. “You know what you are! Damned! Cursed! You will burn for your evils!”

He hissed at me and drew back slightly. “I am not alone in my damnation, dear lady.”

From behind Prince Vlad emerged a woman dressed in a long filmy light blue gown made of the most delicate of silks. It shimmered in the light and was almost transparent. Countless jewels set in gold and silver encircled the woman’s limbs and throat. Long ropes of pearls and other precious stones were woven into her red hair. It took several moments before I realized that this voluptuous creature with the bright, aquamarine eyes and ruby lips was my own daughter.

“Glynis! No!”

The creature saw my cross and shrank back from it, whimpering.

The paralyzing truth dawned on me.

“No! You monster, how could you? How could you do this to her! You have cursed her!” I screamed at him. “You filthy, vile monster! May God damn you to the deepest pit in Hell!”

Prince Vlad chuckled at me. “Such language from a fine Catholic woman.”

“You are a devil!”

Prince Vlad smiled, his fingers playing with a lock of my daughter’s hair.

“Yes, I am. And now, so is she.”

I thrust out my cross at him and he shrank back from the doorway. Glynis also cried out and covered her face. I quickly covered the cross with my fingers.

Prince Vlad laughed at me, recognizing my love for what it was: weakness. “Enjoy your visit.” He turned and swept out of the cell, leaving the lantern resting on the floor.

As the door slammed shut and the lock slid into place, my daughter raised gaze. My eyes shimmered with tears, my mouth trembled and I felt my strength leaving me.

“Oh, my darling, may God, the Virgin and the Saints have mercy on you.”

Glynis stared at me, her eyes sparkling like the finest jewels.

I was too horrified to feel immediately frightened, but as my daughter’s gaze grew more penetrating, more concentrated, I felt the first twinges. I gripped my little crucifix even tighter in my fingers, but did not reveal it to her. I did not want to see her flinch away.

“Glynis?”

“Yes,” was the low response.

I felt my throat constrict. “Do you know who I am?”

“My mother.”

“Yes, cara mia, your mother. And you are my daughter.”

“Yes.”

“And your name is?”

Was she a devil in the guise of my daughter?

“Glynis.”

“Yes, that is right.”

She took a step toward me. “Are you afraid of me, Mother?”

I stared at her transformed countenance for a long moment, then began to weep. “Yes, cara mia, I am frightened.”

Glynis’ eyes slowly lowered and her face began to twitch. “So am I.”

“Oh, cara mia, my darling Glynis, God forgive me for ever bringing you to this horrible place! God forgive me!”

Glynis lowered her lovely face into her hands and stood there as beautiful as any Roman goddess in her fine garments and jewels. I could not help but stare at this strange, beautiful deadly creature that wore the guise of my daughter. But it was my daughter! I felt it in my heart! This fearsome creature of the night, whose skin was as pale as moonlight, with eyes as fierce as a hawk’s, was my eldest daughter: transformed, damned, but still my daughter.

I felt myself crumbling. I had done this. I had let this horrible thing happen. Why had I not let Glynis live her own life? Find her own way? Why had I been so determined to find her a husband? My actions had born bitter fruit for now my daughter was the bride of the Prince of Darkness and all that I had held dear was gone.

“Glynis,” I whispered, love filling my voice.

The creature looked up. The fierce, mesmerized expression was gone and was replaced by a fearful, desperate one. “Mother, help me!”

I hesitated, then tucked my rosary into my blouse. I held out my arms to her, knowing that I was welcoming death.

Glynis moved ever so swiftly across the room and into my embrace. Holding

her closely, I trembled. Tears slipped down my face, tasting bitter on my lips.

“Your sister,” I began.

“She is in heaven with the angels, Mother. When I was dying, she came for me. I saw a great light and she came from it. But then...but then...” Glynis’ voice faded.

“Then she is safe with the Saints.”

“Yes,” Glynis answered.

My child’s flesh was so cold to my touch. The body I held in my arms felt far different from the one I remembered holding before. I kissed the top of Glynis’ head. “I’m so sorry. I am sorry for all I said and did, cara mia.”

The vampire sobbed in my arms. “Oh, Mother, I am so sorry. I am so very sorry! This is my entire fault.”

“No, Glynis, it is not your fault. I should have let you be.”

“Mother.”

“Yes, my darling.”

“I am so hungry, Mother.”

Those simple words were now twisted to strike fear into my very soul. “Yes, I know, my darling. That is why he brought you here. He is a monster.”

“I hate him! I hate him! He forced me to do horrible things, Mother! I hate him for what he did to Father and May!”

“And I hate him for what he has done to you!” I held her tightly. “To us.”

Glynis raised her head, her beautiful eyes rimmed with tears. “I am so hungry. Do you understand?”

I nodded, my lips pressed tightly together. “He has chosen you as my death. Just one more monstrosity.”

“I am fighting so hard! I feel so weak! If it were anyone else, I know the hunger would have overwhelmed me by now. But I am fighting it!” Glynis pulled away from me and wrapped her arms around herself. She walked to the far side of the cell and slid down into the corner.

I clasped my hands tightly together and whispered fervent prayers.

And here I now sit, writing in my little journal, my rosary glowing in my hand. I watch her writhe and sob in the corner.

I will ask of her one thing before she takes my life. Just one thing.

I know now this is my end. I will die now. Tonight. At my daughter’s hand.

May God have mercy on us both.

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

I read my mother’s letters and journal in the aftermath of the horror that transpired in her cell. I read them and wept.

For as I huddled in that corner of her cell, trembling, fighting, trying to win against the hunger, I knew I would feed. I knew her death would be upon my lost soul, and I cried with rage.

How serenely she sat on the floor, writing in her journal, her rosary glowing in her hand. Somehow I knew that her faith made the tiny cross glow with divine power. I could feel it pressing me away from her.

And I hungered...how I hungered.

My mother's eyes lifted to gaze upon me. "Glynis, promise me one thing."

I nodded my head. "Anything you ask."

"Fight him. Escape this place! Do what you must to escape! Please, caramia, I can die in peace if I know you will find a way from this place. That you will fight him and be free!"

I nodded, whimpering as the hunger tore at me. I could hear her heart beating, summoning me to feed. "I swear it. I will escape! I will!"

She forced a smile and laid her journal aside. Calmly, she dug a little hole in the dirt, filth and straw that littered the floor. She genuflected, and I had to look away for my eyes burned as for a moment her body flashed beautifully white. She kissed the rosary tenderly, laid it in the hole, and covered it.

"Mother," I whispered.

Calmly, she stood up, brushing her skirts with her hands. Gently, she tucked her hair back from her face and neck, turning to gaze fully upon me.

"I can die now, in peace, my darling one."

"Mother, I cannot!"

Without her cross, I felt released to move toward her, to take hold of her, but I fought that desire.

"If you do not take my life now, Glynis, he will slaughter me as he did your father. I know it. I do not want to die like that."

"Do not ask this of me!"

"And if you wait any longer, you will go mad with the hunger. Already it is tearing at you. I have heard you howl in the night with the agony of it. He waited until this night when it would seize hold of you to bring you here. If you wait any longer, will you even care that I am your mother?" She looked so brave and beautiful, my haughty, lovely mother.

"I cannot!"

She gave me her most stern look. "I ask you to take my life now before you go mad. I see it in your eyes. You will not care who I am when the hunger overwhelms you. I do not want to suffer that terror. Spare me that agony. Give me release!"

"Never!" I covered my face with my hands. "I will not take your life!"

But you will, my love.

The low, seductive voice of my Master whispered ever so softly into my ear, his cold breath chilling my cheek.

I whirled about, but only shadows surrounded me.

Mother was fidgeting, her hands trembling at her sides. "Please, Glynis, help me escape this place."

She begs for death. Will you not you grant her what she desires?

I could not see my Master, but his presence filled the cell. "I will not!"

My Mother held out her arms to me, her hands beseeching me. "Please, Glynis, release me from this place."

"Stop it, Mother," I screeched at her. The hunger was ripping me to shreds and the soft, haunting voice of my Master filled me with dread. I could not do this thing. I would not!

If you do not take her, I will stake her through and leave her body to rot in our resting place. I will make her suffer as only I can.

I began to scream, my hands raised out against my invisible tormentor. As quickly as his presence had filled the chamber, it was gone, just the echo of his laughter remaining.

My mother was terrified by my actions, but she remained trembling before me, determined and strong. Grasping hold of me, she forced me into her arms, clasping me tightly. I shrieked in agony, throwing back my head in anguish.

Stroking my hair, my mother whispered, "Cara mia, cara mia, I love you. Shush now, be strong."

Overwhelmed, I fell against her. We collapsed to the floor together, my face buried in her lap. Weeping, my mother held me tightly, rocking back and forth. Whispering prayers fervently under her breath, my mother slowly slid her hand under my lowered head and lifted my face.

"As I gave you life before, I give you life once more," she whispered. "Do not forget me. Do not forget that I love you."

"Mother, I will not forget you, Father or May. If I should live until the world dies, I will not forget. Pray for me in heaven. Pray for me."

"I promise," my mother sobbed. "I will pray before the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. I will beseech the Blessed Virgin to watch over you. I pray that they will have mercy on your soul. I promise you." My mother took a deep breath. "Now drink, my darling. Drink and live. And do not forget your promise to me. You will escape this place.

"I will. I swear it." I raised my eyes and captured her gaze. "Now rest, my mother. Rest and feel no pain. Rest."

"Yes, I think I will rest," my Mother whispered, her expression dazed.

"Rest."

"Yes."

"And feel no pain."

"Yes."

Her eyes fluttered shut and she dropped into my arms. Tenderly, tears streaming down my face, I lowered my head and kissed her throat. My fangs descended beneath my red lips.

"I forgive you," she whispered.

The hunger rose.

My pearl white teeth, sharp as daggers, descended into her soft flesh and blood flowed. Feeding as hungrily as a babe at my mother's breast, I drank in my mother's life. The shadows roaming the darkened cell pressed close as the wolves' howls echoed through the night.

In that filthy chamber, my mother held me in her arms and gave me all that she possessed of worth in this dark world: her life's blood, which flowed in a dark red gush. It became a sacred moment, and I wept as she weakened against me.

"I forgive you," she whispered again softly.

The hunger would not release me. I fed despite my sobs of anguish and my tears.

"A light is coming," my mother said.

As the hunger abated and died within me like the last embers of a great fire, the true horror of what I was doing washed over me. Forcing my mouth from the bleeding wound, I glanced about the cell. No great wondrous light filled the cell with ethereal beauty.

My mother smiled, her lips pale and blue. "May, dear May..."

I looked up sharply, but did not see the angelic apparition of my sister.

"Mother, do you see her?"

There was no response.

"Mother?"

Silence greeted me. Not even the darkness whispered to me.

I looked down at her and saw that her eyes were staring.

"Mother! No!"

I wept into her hair and held her tightly. I do not how it happened, but when I gazed down upon her again, her eyes were closed. She appeared to be sleeping, but I knew she was truly dead.

"Forgive me, forgive me."

Cradling my mother's body, I wept into the darkness. I could not bear this agony, this horror. But the hunger was now gone, and the horrible all consuming desire to feed was appeased.

"You are free, Mother. You are free." I covered her face with kisses, holding her. "I will escape. I swear it. I will."

As the wolves once more began to howl, I held my mortal mother's dead body and wept.

Hours later the door yawned open and Vlad Dracula swept into the cell. I rose up before him, my flesh was now rosy from my feeding. Behind me, meticulously laid out, was my dead mother.

"It is done," I said somberly.

Vlad smiled at me. "I knew you would not disappoint me."

My lips spread into a dark smile, not that different from his own. "Oh, but I will."

He was startled. "In what way?"

"You will see. Someday."

In the hours after my Mother's death, I had taken upon myself her sacred edict. I would escape. I would be free. Her body had given birth to me. Her blood gave me life. Despite Vlad's dark power, the power of her flesh and blood gave me strength to endure all that he would inflict on me. He had meant for me to defile my mother by feasting on her. Instead, she had given me a holy sacrament of flesh and blood.

Vlad stared at me for a long moment. I could see he could not read my expression. "I won here, did I not?" He suddenly seemed less sure of himself.

I smiled at him. "I wish to go be with my sisters now."

His eyes narrowed on my face, then nodded. "Very well."

I swept past him and left him staring at my dead mother.

Someday, he will know that she conquered him.

Someday.

Chapter 10

The Journal of Andrew Wright- England

17th of July, 1819

I must admit I am quite upset at the day's events. The morning started quite well. I took a stroll across the grounds, overseeing my workers, and enjoying the morning breeze. The lush English countryside spread out around me as the sun peeked through the clouds sailing across the blue sky above. Not a drop of rain in sight. Heavenly!

Despite the loveliness of the day, I slowly found myself falling into a pensive mood. My thoughts became tormented as I walked toward the manor. For nearly a year I have lived without the company of my family and the months of separation are now unbearable.

Many a young man would be glad to be rid of his parents and sisters for such a long length of time and enjoy the freedom of running the family estate, but I am not that sort of man. At times I am utterly despondent. I miss the sharp tongue of my mother, the calm tones of my father, the shy giggles of my youngest sister and, of course, the wild ways of my sister, Glynis.

It has been nearly a month since their last letter. At that time they were visiting in Italy and preparing to leave for Buda. Their diversion to Buda had been unexpected and was a disappointment for it prolonged their stay abroad. But when my mother has set her mind, nothing will stop her. Though I am terribly fond of my sister and I want her to be happy, I am not sure marriage is what she actually needs.

I admit I am the only member of the family who does not find Glynis

troublesome. Honestly, I adore her grandiose ideas of a life of freedom from society's restrictive ways, and I have always admired her desire to be treated as an equal to any man. Many women are satisfied to be treated as a gentle creature in need of being cared for and protected. Glynis will have none of that. She has always wanted to be acknowledged as an intelligent, opinionated individual in control of her own destiny. Perhaps it is wrong for me to support my sister's wild ideas, but I do think she is a marvelous delight.

I miss all my family and I am quite desperate for them to return. The house seems so empty without them.

It was in the midst of my thoughts I looked up to see my wife rushing toward me in a flurry of pink.

"Andrew, Andrew, darling!"

She was beautiful with her brown curls bouncing and her face flushed as she ran toward me clutching her skirt up around her ankles.

"Andrew, dearest, a letter arrived in the post. It is from your father!"

I felt my face burst into a wide grin. "At last word from my wandering family. I have been beginning to worry."

She ran into my arms, laughing with delight. "It was such a relief to see the letter. Hurry and open it!"

I anxiously took the envelope and pried it open.

Angeline drew close to me, peering down at my father's looping handwriting. "What does he say?"

I quickly read, my lips moving silently. I began to chuckle as I read. "It seems that Glynis caused a little stir upon arriving in Buda. Father caught her in a sitting room trying to light up a smoking pipe."

"Will your sister ever stop trying to be a man?" My wife laughed with delight.

"She does not want to be a man, Angeline. She just wants to have the power of a man," I corrected her. "Father goes on and writes that Glynis has been behaving abominably in our mother's eyes. Evidently, May and Glynis were invited to join a riding party, and Glynis showed up in trousers, declaring that it is silly to wear a dress to ride a horse."

"Oh, my! What happened?"

"Mother wanted to wring her neck, but Father calmly sent Glynis to change. You know she always obeys Father. He goes on to write that May is recovering from her fainting spells and eating better now. Oh, this is interesting. Father says that a Count Dracula has asked to court Glynis."

"A count? Really? A native of that land by the sound of the name?"

"I think so. Oh, yes, father writes that they are traveling to his country estate for a visit. That is interesting. It does sound rather serious. You do not think they would leave Glynis as a bride in that country, do you?"

My wife pursed her lips as she considered the possibility. "I do not know."

Your mother is very intent on marrying her off.”

“But it would not be right. I would miss her dreadfully. I never did like this whole concept of traveling the Continent to find her a husband.” My brow furrowed. “No, no. I should not worry. She will do something to horrify the Count and then they shall come home.”

“I do not think they are ever going to find your sister a proper husband,” my wife confessed.

I nodded, my expression thoughtful. “Glynis has a mind of her own. She is very opinionated. I still remember how horrified mother was when she discovered Glynis wearing my clothes and preparing to clip her hair short, all in attempt to sneak into the parlor where my friends and I were having a discussion about politics.”

“She did that? How old was she?”

“It was about three years ago, so she was almost sixteen. My sister is very odd at times.” I smiled at the memory.

“You should hear her go on and on about Lord Byron. Do you know she hid away a copy of the New Monthly Magazine that had that horrible story by Lord Byron about a vampire? Your mother was very upset when she found it. She said that young ladies should not be reading such things,” Angelina said with a little laugh.

“I thought Byron claimed he hadn’t written that story? That chap Polidori wrote it, I believe. But more shocking than that is the fact that Glynis met Byron around four years ago right before the scandal of his adulterous affairs broke.”

This amazed my wife. “Really? However did she manage that?”

I explained: “She was friends with the sister of a young man I was acquainted with that had ties to Byron. Glynis found this out and managed to get an invitation to visit the family in their London home for two weeks. Would you not just know that Byron would show up with one of his mistresses one night? A horrible party got underway and Glynis came down the stairs dressed in the clothes of one of the older sisters of the family. I arrived at the house to visit my friend and found him in a drunken stupor on the front steps. I went into the house and found Glynis seated right next to Byron listening to the most randy poems. I grabbed her hand and marched her right out of there. I never told our parents and ever since that time Glynis has been simply mad for Byron. When he went abroad, she cried for days.” My voice grew hushed as the memory of my sister’s exploits brought bittersweet tears to the surface. I missed her terribly and when I thought of her, I felt this horrible sense of dread wash over me.

My wife placed her arms around me and said, “I do not think your mother will be able to marry her off. I just do not think it will happen. She will do something nefarious and end up back home.” She tucked her hand into the crook of my arm and kissed my cheek. Angelina smiled at me brightly, forcing dark thoughts from my mind. “Do not be so worried! They are fine, my love, and in

good health. They are most likely on their way home as we speak.”

“I hope so, Angeline. I just have the most dreadful feeling inside of me. These last days I’ve had the most terrible dreams. When I wake up I cannot remember what I have dreamed. But I have such a strong sense of dread. I just cannot seem to shake it.” I looked at her seeking solace in her loving gaze. “My rational mind tells me that my fears cannot be reasonable, and yet, within me, I do believe they have come to harm.”

“Do not worry, Andrew. Soon the family will return and all will be well. I am sure of it,” she insisted. “Now, come on and smile, my dear husband, before we are drenched by the coming rain.”

Startled, I looked up into the once tranquil sky to see ominous storm clouds gathering above us. In the distance, thunder rumbled warningly. An intense cold engulfed us, and we both shivered.

Gazing into my wife’s eyes, I whispered, “I pray for them, but I fear that my prayer will go unanswered.”

She kissed the tear that slipped down my cheek and we hurried into the house as the storm erupted.

How, oh, how, do I console my frightened heart when my spirit refuses to be consoled?

Oh, please, please, let them all return safely.

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

The Castle

I awoke from my nightmares to find Cneajna anxiously searching the coffin we share.

“Hurry, Glynis. Sit up!”

I snapped upright, my eyes feeling bright and hard. I could feel the night strengthening my cold vampire body. I stretched out my limbs feeling the darkness caressing me.

“I am hungry,” I said to her.

She searched the velvet and silk throws we slept upon with a desperate look upon her face. “I know, I know. You must feed again. That is the way it always is in the beginning. But I must know something. Where is your ring?”

I furrowed my brow. “Ring?”

“Yes, darling, a ring. Like this!” Cneajna extended her hand.

I peered at the ring, trying to recall the events of another lifetime. The events before my rebirth were in a haze, my vampire sleep still clouding my mind as was the growing hunger. Then I remembered.

“Oh, yes, that ring. I threw it away and one of the gypsy women took it. I did not want the horrible thing.” I wrinkled my nose with disgust. “It was dreadfully ugly.”

Cneajna shook me with frustration. “These are our wedding rings! Our

Master gave them to us!”

“Oh.” I swept my hair back from my face. I really did not care about a wedding ring. I was not married, at least not by my standards. I was quite sure that a priest would not marry vampires. Beyond that, there was the whole issue of entering a church. I wondered if I could enter consecrated ground. Besides, I was feeling much better tonight, almost like my old self. Yet, what was my old self? What did that mean?

I furrowed my brow.

Ah, yes, I remembered through a haze. There had been another life before this one. I must remember that.

“Glynis, the ring is important!”

“I suppose he will be furious with me that I threw it away,” I said. That thought actually made me smile.

“Hurry! We must get the ring back!”

I let her pull me from the coffin as I pondered the events of the last few days. There had been another life before this one. I had been a lady from England, highborn, wealthy, and very disagreeable. Puckering my brow, I concentrated. It was as if a door had closed on another world, and I was trying to see back through a keyhole.

“Glynis, now!” Cneajna snapped.

Slowly, I realized the language I now spoke was not my own. The language I could understand so well had been foreign and strange to my ears just a few days before. His blood had changed me and granted me some of his knowledge.

Cneajna grabbed my hand and forced me from the tomb. The tombs of the others remained silent as we hurried past them. Pulling me down the long corridor, Cneajna grew increasingly agitated.

“I feel odd,” I said.

“It is another sign of you becoming.”

“I cannot remember much from before...now.”

“Some vampires completely forget their human lives. They only remember when they are much older and bored with their immortal existence.”

“Do you remember yours?”

“Vaguely. But what I do remember fills me with longing and bitterness. It is best not to dwell on what was.”

I began to giggle. It all seemed so ludicrous.

Cneajna whirled around, her teeth flashing. “What is it?”

“I hate it here!”

“This is now your home!”

I continued to giggle. “You do not understand. All I ever wanted was to live a life that was not predestined by my parents and society.” I threw out my hands and twirled about. “I got my wish and it is a terrible joke on me!”

Cneajna growled at me. “That is of no importance. We must find the ring.”

Now!”

I stopped spinning and shrugged. “Very well.”

Cneajna grabbed hold of my hand. “Come along. We must find the girl who took it.”

I let myself be led along, feeling quite dazed. I had damned myself to this world with my ridiculous wishes. I had killed my family. Yet, in this moment, this red hazy moment, I could barely remember them.

We entered the cavernous kitchen and found the gypsies finishing the preparations for their evening meal. The servants glanced up at us with frightened expressions that made me laugh. Cneajna squeezed my hand tightly, moving slowly toward them.

Ilona quickly stepped forward to greet Cneajna, her wrinkled face sweaty and fearful. Her coal black hair glistened in the firelight as she ran a gnarled hand over it fretfully. “How may I serve you, my Mistress?”

“Which one, Glynis?”

I hummed to myself, clicking my long nails together. “Hmm, what?”

“Who took the ring?” I could see Cneajna was about to lose her patience, but I really did not care.

I narrowed my eyes, my gaze sweeping over the gypsies. I could feel something snap inside of me and my demeanor changed.

“Well?”

It was as if some inner fire had exploded within me. I felt as if my eyes were blazing and my skin was flushed with the heat. My hair shimmered over my pale shoulders like curls of flame. “I hunger!”

Cneajna laid a gentle hand on my arm. “I know, dearest, but you must remember who took the ring.”

Her cool touch settled the fire slightly. “She is not here.”

“If one of my people have displeased you in anyway, I will-“

“Silence!” Cneajna snapped at Ilona, cutting her off. “One of your women took her ring. We want it back.”

A young gypsy woman sauntered into the kitchen in the company of two men. When they saw us, their footsteps halted.

“Arghira, do you know who took a ring from the young one?” Ilona asked.

The woman’s eyes widened until her dark pupils were drowning in a sea of white.

“You!” I snarled at her.

Before Cneajna could react, I vaulted across the room. With a shriek, the gypsy fled. The two young men attempted to intercept me, but I slammed them both into the wall, running into the night after the girl.

I could hear Cneajna chasing me, cursing herself for her stupidity under her breath. “Do not kill her! We are not allowed to kill them!”

Well, I was never much for paying attention to rules. Arghira ran into a hut

and slammed the door shut. Hissing angrily, I struck the door, breaking off the sharp tips of my nails.

Realizing that one of their own was in danger, the men of the gypsy clan snatched up torches and whatever sharp instrument they could find, rushing toward me. I whirled about and hissed as Cneajna crouched low, growling at them warningly as she bared her long teeth.

The sharp, piercing cries of the frightened woman trapped within her dismal little hut echoed in the darkness. I was crazed with the hunger and her cries only made me even more famished. I battered the door with such fierce blows, the wood cracked and splintered.

“Glynis! Stop! This is forbidden. Get the ring and let it be!”

The gypsies shouted angrily, obviously frightened to move against us, but determined to save the girl. Ilona appeared in the courtyard, crying out for them to stand back lest we kill them all.

“Glynis, please, stop!” Cneajna moved rapidly toward me.

The door broke open, wood splintering in every direction. With a shriek of glee, I rushed into the darkness within. Cneajna was just behind me as I grabbed the girl. I grunted as Cneajna grabbed hold of my long red hair and wrenched my head back.

“Stop it now! We cannot touch the gypsies!”

I was crazed. Desperate. Hungry. I struck Cneajna with the back of my hand, and she immediately slapped me back.

“Let go of the girl!”

The madness of the hunger burned in me. “No, she is mine! I hunger!”

The gypsy girl cowered on her knees before us, her arm caught in the vise-like grip of my hand. She whimpered, her hands clutching Cneajna’s dress.

“She is not yours to kill.”

“I must feed,” I shouted at her. I shoved past her, dragging the poor girl with me.

The courtyard was filled with angry, terrified gypsies. As I pulled my screaming prey toward the castle, they yelled at me, brandishing their torches. I hissed at them, furious with their impertinence.

The doorway to the kitchen suddenly filled by the presence of Prince Vlad Dracula. His dark green eyes burned as he stared out at the drama unfolding before him.

“What is happening here?”

“They came to us and the young one-“ Ilona babbled just before Cneajna slapped her.

Vlad looked sharply at his blond Bride. “Cneajna, explain!”

The beautiful vampire stood majestically among the agitated mob of gypsies. “My Master, Glynis-“

“I hunger,” I interrupted impatiently. I roughly pulled the girl along with me

as I walked toward Vlad. "I want this girl."

Vlad seemed mildly amused, his mouth spreading into a smile beneath his mustache. "I am delighted to hear of your desire to feed, but I forbid the killing of our servants. Once they are gone, who will serve us?"

"I want her," I said in a low, fierce voice.

"Release her!"

"No!"

Vlad suddenly advanced on me, his most rebellious young Bride, raising his hand to strike me down. I hissed at him, backing away.

Cneajna rushed forward. "Please, my Master! The girl stole Glynis' ring! We came to claim it from her when the hunger overwhelmed Glynis! Have mercy!"

Vlad moved so swiftly, he had me by my throat before I could even try to dodge away from him. "Tell me, is this true?"

Burning with the hunger, I could hardly comprehend his words.

Still grasping me by the throat, Vlad looked down at my prey. "Is this true?"

Shaking her head vigorously, Arghira cast down her eyes.

Cneajna grabbed hold of the girl's hair and yanked back her head. "Where is it?"

"Please! I took it only because she gave it to me!"

"Where is it?" Cneajna twisted the girl's hair.

Shakily, the girl drew out the chain the ring was threaded on from the folds of her blouse. "Please, have mercy! I took it because she did not want it!"

Vlad snatched the chain off the girl's neck with a shout of fury. Cneajna shrank back from his anger as the gypsy girl screamed. I merely glared at the great Prince with pure hatred.

I was so hungry and he was not letting me feed!

"Did you give the girl the ring?" Vlad screamed into my face, his face fiery red.

"In another life," I answered in a low voice.

"Another life," Vlad muttered under his breath. His dark mood suddenly vanished as he smiled. "Another life. Yes, that is a good answer." He released me and threw the girl into Cneajna's arms. Ripping the ring from the chain, he motioned the gypsies back with one hand. "Here, Glynis, now wear it in this life."

I reluctantly took the ring and shoved it onto my finger. "I hunger."

Vlad seized the gypsy girl and turned toward the servants. "She broke our agreement. You swore to serve me loyally. Stealing from my wives is a crime I will not tolerate. Serve me faithfully, I will reward you. Betray me, then death will come!" Vlad flung the girl into my waiting arms.

Without hesitation, I yanked the girl's head back and bit deeply into her throat. Blood flowed in dark red rivulets down the shrieking girl's flesh to the

dark place between her breasts where she had hidden the forbidden ring.

Satisfied, Vlad returned to the depths of the castle, leaving the gypsies to quietly disappear into their humble homes. Soon the courtyard was empty save for Cneajna, the slowly dying girl, and me.

Cneajna stood over me as I drained away every last drop of life from the mortal. I was aware of her, but all I wanted was that thick, rich blood filling me, chasing away the hunger, and making my body warm again. The cold night air swirled around us as the silent stars shone down upon us.

The dead gypsy fell to the cold stones of the courtyard. I remained on my knees staring at the lifeless body.

“Glynis?”

I could not answer her, not yet. I licked the blood from my fangs and my lips, tasting its richness.

“My child?”

Slowly, I looked up. The hunger and the madness was gone. My mind felt clear. Strong. Like my body.

Cneajna laid a hand against my smooth cheek. “Glynis?”

“I remember.”

“What?”

“What I am. Who I was.” It was all clear now. That other life. The door was fully thrown open.

I stared up at the magnificence of the night, the beauty of the vampire standing over me, and I remembered it all. My father, my mother, my sister, my brother, my home so far away in England, all our travels, the deaths of my family, my own death and rebirth. With startling clarity, no longer hidden and distant, all I had experienced and endured flooded into my mind. With equal clarity, I realized the chains I had once endured no longer bound me. I was free of all past restraints. I was free to live forever, free to kill, free to feed, free to do what I had to do to escape this place and obtain my ultimate freedom.

In that moment, I was completely reborn.

I slowly stood up and looked into the worried eyes of the blond vampire. “I have become.”

“Become what?”

“A vampire,” I answered calmly.

She smiled at me and said, “Then all is well.”

Chapter 11

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

The Castle

One night I found myself wandering alone through the castle. When I had

risen I realized the other vampires had already awakened and were prowling the night. Honestly, I was quite glad to be alone. Melancholy thoughts of my family were drifting through my mind and I did not feel like dealing with the other vampires. They were annoying with their insistence that I be grateful for my new undead existence and their determination that I simply accept my fate.

Ha! Obviously, they have no concept of my true nature. I have never in my entire life simply accepted anything I was supposed to. I accept nothing at face value and I am rather stubborn. Frankly, I am quite contrary.

So, glad to be rid of the other vampires, I gathered a lace shawl that Cneajna had given me about my shoulders, and I drifted off into the dark corridors.

My mind was ravaged by memories as I walked: each and every one a brutal reminder of my former life. I almost wished for the bliss of forgetfulness for every memory was a painful stab into my dead little heart. But then, I would not want to be simpleton, lost in the hunger, doing as Vlad told me.

The memories were torturous in their vividness. I remembered my beloved brother, Andrew, holding me upside by my ankles when I was four as he swung me about as my mother came screaming down the stairs that he put me down at once. Of course, I was laughing with delight the whole time. Andrew and I constantly gave Mother fits.

And I remembered my beloved May. Oh, yes, she annoyed me with her wide-eyed innocence and calm nature. She was never up for any sort of adventure, but I did love her. I fondly recalled sitting on my bed reading to her as she curled up against me, warm and frail, delicate and sweet.

I remembered my parents. My dear sweet father with his even temperament and twinkling eyes and his mutterings of “there, there.” And of course, my Mother, that I have to confess, I am very much like in many ways. We always had a cantankerous relationship, but it was always a loving one. Even in the heat of all our arguments, I never doubted she loved me.

Tears slipped down my face as I tried not to think of her death at my hands. I felt the cold wetness of the trail they left behind on my cheeks.

Now dear Andrew and Angeline are all that remain of my family.

Dearest Andrew, how I miss him.

Ariana emerged from the shadows. In one swift motion, she reached out and touched my tears.

“Do not cry, dear sister,” she whispered softly.

“I am rather sad and cannot help it,” I responded.

Ariana wiped the tears away with her cold little hands. She was so child-like in her movements and sincerity it made me weep all the more. I could not help but wonder how old Ariana had been when she had been brought into this dark world.

“I used to cry, too. A long time ago. So long ago I cannot remember why I

cried.” She pursed her lips. “I sometimes wish I could remember.”

“Was it for your family?” I asked.

She raised her dark eyes and frowned. “But my family is here.”

“No, I mean your mortal family.”

Ariana considered this for a long moment, then shook her head. “I do not remember them.”

I sighed heavily and patted Ariana’s cheek lightly before moving on. She was such a simple child. Perhaps it was best she remembered nothing so she could embrace the decaying grandeur of the castle and the cold creatures that inhabited it.

“Glynis?”

“Yes,” I said, casting a glance over my shoulder.

She seemed almost shy. “Would you... would you like me to show you something?”

I was about to deny the young girl, but something about her expression held a resemblance to my beloved May, so I sighed. “All right, Ariana. What is it?”

She smiled and reached out her small hand. “It is a secret. Come. I will show you.”

I took her hand and hurried after her as the dark haired vampire led me up a series of winding stairways and down long corridors. She drew me so quickly behind her the world rushed past me, and I had the sensation of flight. All at once, she stopped, whirling about before clutching me close to her.

“Tell no one I brought you here,” she said in a low voice, her eyes gleaming.

Smiling brightly, Ariana pushed a door open and lead me into a large room filled with dozens of traveling trunks. Many were already open, the contents thrown about haphazardly on the dusty floor. Six trunks stood out sharply. Each was graced with a brass W on the front latch. With a small cry, I threw myself down before one of the trunks and fumbled with the latches. The lid swung upwards to reveal my father’s favorite traveling coat.

“Father,” I whispered, reaching into the trunk. I drew out the coat and smelt the fine fragrance of my father’s favorite cigars. “Oh, Father.”

Ariana stood beside me with anxious eyes. Her little hands were twisting her curly hair into tight little spirals.

I crawled over to another trunk and opened it. The sweet aroma of lavender wafted up to me as I laid a hand gently on the fine silk gown Mother had loved so. Wrapping my father’s coat around my shoulders, I moved on to May’s trunk. Peering inside, I found May’s battered little doll, Emily. Mother had the doll made for May when she was just a little girl, and it had May’s own hair as its curly locks.

“Dearest May, are you praying for me?” I whispered, then kissed the hard porcelain lips of the doll.

Hugging the doll close, I moved over to my own trunk. Opening it, I drew in

my breath sharply. It was as if I were opening a doorway into my mortal life. Drawing back the folds of my many dresses, my hands searched for the small jewelry case I kept my personal treasures in. My hands felt the hard surface and I drew the box from the depths of the trunk.

“What is that?”

“It is my treasure chest, May,” I answered. Realizing what I had said, I looked up at Ariana. “I mean...Ariana...”

The vampire smiled faintly. Her eyes were sympathetic, soft, and, I thought, caring. “He gave her to us.”

I nodded, biting my quivering bottom lip. I understood far too well the power of the hunger. Best not to think of that or of May’s death or else I should go mad.

I reached one hand back into the trunk and felt under the lining until I found the small tear I was searching for. I drew out a small key I had hidden in the lining of the chest and fit it into the lock of my jewelry case. It clicked open and I sat back on my heels with a sigh. Directly on top was a sketch of Lord Byron I had snipped from a newspaper.

“Who is that?” Ariana knelt next to me, leaning forward to gaze down at the picture.

“The love of my very short, unromantic life,” I sighed.

“Your lover? With such full lips his kisses must have been so wonderful,” Ariana decided with a coy flip of her head.

“Actually, I never kissed him. I met him just once at a friend’s house. I was very young and I think he thought I was a delightful nuisance. I always fancied meeting him on the Continent and having him fall madly in love with me. He is a poet from England. His name is Lord Byron. He is most scandalous.” I laid the clipping on the floor and drew out a much-tattered magazine. “This is something he wrote. At least that is what the magazine says. My brother, Andrew, says a friend of his wrote it. It is a story about a vampire.” I let out a little laugh.

“Really? A vampire? Like us?” Ariana was intrigued. “What does it say?”

“You know if I had not read this, I would not have known what you are. What I am now. I remember reading it late at night, grasping a candle in one hand and a cross in the other. I was so frightened. I asked my mother about vampires the very next day. She told me to stop indulging in such fanciful tales.”

Ariana edged closer to me and shyly hooked one of her arms through mine. “What does the story say, Glynis?”

I took comfort in her affectionate gestures. It made me feel a little less alone. Unfolding the magazine, I settled down on the floor. Ariana huddled close, watching as I flipped through the pages of the magazine until I found the beginning of the story.

“The Vampyre by Lord Byron. Though, according to my brother, it is by

John Polidori. Shall I read it to you? It is in English.”

Ariana nodded her head. “I will understand. Read it. Please.”

“All right then.” I laid the magazine on my lap and drew my shawl around Ariana’s shoulders. Snuggled into each other, I began. “It happened that in the midst...”

I read the entire story with great intensity, my voice rising and falling with dramatic flair. I love to read and I love stories. I was swept up in the melodrama of the story and only for a moment did I allow myself the painful recognition that in some ways, it mirrored my own. Finally, I finished with the breathless words “...Aubrey's sister had glutted the thirst of a Vampire!”

Ariana smiled at the gruesome ending. “We always win!”

I could not help but laugh. “You are supposed to be upset, Ariana. Lord Ruthven outwitted Aubrey and killed his sister. It is supposed to be a tragic ending.”

“How could it be if the vampire succeeded?” She frowned at me, confused.

“We are not supposed to cheer on the vampire, Ariana. He is the villain!”

Ariana furrowed her brow. “Oh, do not be silly! He was quite grand! Do you think he is real? This Lord Ruthven? Do you, Glynis? Do you think he could come visit us here at the castle?”

I shook my head and folded up my magazine. How ironic that the story I had once loved so much now seemed a mockery of my own fate? “No, Ariana. He is not real. He was created for the story. In England, they do not even know we exist. We are just figments of someone’s imagination.”

Ariana pouted, lowering her eyebrows over disenchanted eyes. “How could they not know? We do not only exist here.”

“Perhaps, but in England we are considered mere creatures of imagination or madness.” I hurriedly tucked my magazine and the clipping of Byron into the box and placed it back in my chest. I did not even want to consider the horror with which my brother would view my new visage. He would gaze upon me and know I was no longer human, but something monstrous. I knew it in my soul.

Ariana wandered away and began rummaging through a battered chest nearby.

“What are you looking for?”

“I want you to read something else to me. I found it in this chest a long time ago.”

I moved among the traveling cases and slowly came to realize that these were all that remained of the poor travelers who had the misfortune of coming across the castle in their journeys. All sorts of things littered the floor around us: clothes, shoes, toiletries, hats, and various other items.

“This is terrible,” I whispered.

Ariana tossed a wedding gown to one side and burrowed deeper. “I know it was in here. It was a book.”

The door opened and Elina stood in the doorway. Her long straight black hair flowed around her like a mantle and her keen eyes narrowed as she gazed upon me. “The Master is calling for you, Glynis. He wants to see you in his library.”

“She was reading the most delightful story to me, Elina. It was about a vampire that outwitted this mortal man and killed his sister before escaping! It was so wonderful!”

I lifted a dress from my own chest and held it against my body. It was my favorite gown made of fine Italian silk in the prettiest shade of blue. Without a second thought, I pulled the gauzy concoction I was wearing over my head and dressed in my own gown. I did not bother with a corset and felt quite better in my own clothing.

“I really do not care what she was reading to you. Our Master wants to see her. Now.” Elina’s voice was quite nasty as she pulled Ariana’s hair sharply.

Ariana danced free, whirling about. “His name was Lord Ruthven! He was quite ruthless and cruel. So marvelous he was!” Ariana gaily plunged into a retelling of the story, avoiding Elina’s frustrated looks.

I pulled out a pair of my slippers and placed them on my feet. I wrapped a scarf about my neck, tucking it into the low neckline of my gown. Reaching back into the trunk, I found a pair of gloves and my favorite bonnet. In just a few minutes, I had transformed myself from a vampire Bride into a fine English aristocrat. Twisting my hair up into a proper style, I topped it off with my bonnet.

“I am telling you to be quiet now!” Elina tried to catch Ariana, but the younger girl easily evaded her, leaping over a trunk.

“...and it was too late, of course! Because Aubrey could not tell until midnight...”

I smiled sweetly at Elina as I brushed past her. “I am sure she will tell you all the details!”

Elina hissed at me as I laughed and hurried down the hallways and staircases that would lead me back to the heart of the castle. I could hear Ariana still retelling the story until Elina managed to catch her and gag her. I laughed, then found my way to the library where my family had found a few hours of peaceful refuge just a few days before. As I neared the door, I felt what little gaiety I had gained from my storytelling with Ariana drain out of me. Once more, I felt a terrible feeling of despair.

Sighing deeply, I stood outside of the door. For one insane moment, I wished with all my heart that I would open the door to find my family seated there, waiting for me, happy to see me, and ready for the journey home. Instead, I entered and found Vlad seated at the table where my father had sat. He was intently reading a magazine in English.

“You were calling me?”

“You did not hear me?” He did not look up.

“I was with Ariana. I was reading her a story,” I answered rather primly.

Vlad looked up. He took in my English garb, then sat back in his chair. “Cneajna tells me you do not suffer the vagueness of the mind anymore. Is this correct?”

“Yes. I know who I am and what I am,” I answered very softly. I was not sure how to behave before this man who had taken not only my entire life but my very virginity as well. That intimacy was not something I felt capable of dealing with properly. All I was certain of was that I was trapped, and I had to find a way out. Perhaps, if I was sociable to this man who claimed to be my Master, I could somehow conceive of a way to escape.

“And just who and what are you?” Vlad did not seem very threatening tonight. Actually, he was being polite and somewhat lordly, rather like he had behaved when I had first met him.

“I am Lady Glynis Wright of England. And I am a vampire,” I answered.

Vlad began to chuckle. “A very good answer, Lady Glynis Wright. Now sit down.”

I obeyed, my hands primly folded on my lap. I met his gaze full on, my eyes feeling rather bright and shrewd. I watched him carefully, trying to ascertain how I should respond to this bizarre foreign man.

“I called you here because it is important that you understand certain aspects of our existence. We are Vampires. We kill for blood: hunters, travelers, villagers if they defy us, whomever pleases us. You are now my wife, my Bride. I expect you to act as such. You are not allowed to leave the castle grounds without my permission. I hold you here under my power. There is no escape. We all sleep together in the tombs in the chapel unless I otherwise allow. I expect you to dress appropriately. In England, you may dress this way. In my home, you will dress as I please. And this,” he motioned to my dress, “does not please me.”

“I do not want to be here,” I stated firmly. “I want to return home.”

“I forbid it. The matter is settled. I am your Master, the Brides are your sisters, and this is your home.”

“We shall see,” I said stoically, emulating my dear departed father. “Now, may I be excused?”

Vlad studied my face intently and the dark passion I had witnessed in his green eyes before was beginning to grow within their emerald depths. It made me vastly uncomfortable and I suddenly wanted to escape back to the Brides’ chambers.

“Have Cneajna and Ariana dress you as you were. I will have none of this Englishness in my household. You may go.” Vlad pointedly returned to his reading.

I stood up and tossed my head in defiance. Haughtily, I strode from the room. To my surprise, I heard him chuckle to himself.

I took my time going back to the Brides' chambers. I was feeling quite contrary and did not want to obey him. At the same time, I knew if I pushed him too far, violence would surely befall me. Honestly, all I truly wanted was a few precious moments of peace.

When I entered the room, Elina was standing at the windows gazing down at the river that cuts through the gorge below our castle. Ariana and Cneajna were sorting through some clothing and jewels, whispering softly.

"Vlad says I am not to look English," I announced.

"The Master was grieved by your appearance?" Cneajna looked at my outfit and sighed. "I think you look rather pretty."

I frowned and stomped my foot. "He is such a bastard. However do you stand him?"

Elina turned sharply toward me. "He is our husband. You best remember that."

"Bah!" I waved my hand over my head. "He is a brute. I despise him."

Seeing their shocked expressions, I frowned even more. I hated this place. I hated everything about it. But at this moment, I was at a loss as to how to escape. Sighing, I began to disrobe, removing once more all that was left of my life as Lady Glynis Wright. "I like my clothes. Why ever does he want us to dress like we do? It is utter nonsense."

"The Master spent time in Adrianople when he was a young man and was intrigued by the female slaves of the Sultan," Cneajna responded and drew a long filmy gown over my head.

"Ah, so he has dressing as slave women! I should have known. It is utterly preposterous."

Ariana giggled and wrapped an ornate belt around my waist. "Oh, Glynis, you are so very naughty."

I stomped my foot and tossed my head. "Really? Well, I would rather be naughty and wear my own clothing than dash about in this ridiculous costume." As I spoke, Cneajna laid a heavy necklace around my neck and placed bracelets around my pale wrists.

"Well, I think you look lovely either way," Cneajna said soothingly.

Elina whirled about. "Must you always be such a ridiculous creature! He dresses us as his Brides." She flung out her hands, the jewels adorning her rings and bracelets flashing in the firelight. "He made us his Princesses. Before this I was merely a peasant's daughter. I remember the days of endless toil for the most meager of profits. I remember the endless hunger and the filth we lived in. I remember! And now, I am the wife of the greatest Wallachian warrior of all time, Vlad Tepes, the Dragon, the Impaler!"

I was shocked at the vehemence in her voice. "Impaler? Whatever does that mean?"

Elina drew close to me, her pale face stark in the firelight, her long black

raven hair gleaming. “He was a great man. He destroyed his enemies, impaled them for all to see.”

I blanched, remembering my poor father’s torn body. Anger welled up inside of me as I stepped defiantly toward her. “He is a sadistic monster! He murdered my family!”

“They defied him! Did not give him his due!”

“He is not a Prince anymore! His kingdom is gone!”

Ariana and Cneajna stood in silence, their eyes wide, not sure what to do or say. I could feel my anger spilling out like hot fire and flooding toward Elina. I could feel hers scalding me. We glared at each other.

“He is your Master! And mine!”

“I would rather die!”

“Maybe you should!”

I smirked at her. “Really? What would your dear Master say if you killed me?”

She narrowed her eyes at me. “You should be grateful for what he has done for you.”

“You mean for making me into a monster?”

“You are a vampire! I remember how exhilarating it felt to fully become a vampire. I remember how I loved the way my body transformed and the power that rose up inside of me. But you... you are weak!”

I tilted my head, arching an eyebrow. “You think me weak?”

“Yes. I watch you. Languishing in your thoughts. Afraid of what you are. Afraid to feed. Afraid to be what you are. Your reticence is weakness and I abhor weakness. Why the Master desires you, such a pathetic weakling, is beyond my comprehension. Not when he has me, a Wallachian Bride that desires nothing more than to fulfill his wishes.” With a faint hiss, she turned away in disgust.

“That is why you are weak,” I said to her back, then sat down on a chair. I began to paw through the jewelry box on the table.

“I will destroy you,” Elina hissed, taking a step toward me.

I ignored her.

Cneajna stared at me, then grabbed hold of Elina, pulling her away into the shadows.

Ariana sat down next to me and grabbed the jewelry box. Humming to herself, she began to hand me large ornate rings studded with fine jewels.

“Elina is not very fond of you,” she said.

“I noticed.” I stared down at my hands. The rings and decorative bracelets reminded me of paintings I had seen of the ladies in the exotic lands of the East. Our gowns were made of fine silks and satins: all had a distinctly foreign look. I smiled wryly. How stupid to think of such trivial things as dresses and jewelry. I had to concentrate on how I was going to escape this hell.

Cneajna returned from her talk with Elina, a tight smile on her face. “How does she look?”

“Oh, so pretty! Just like one of us!” Ariana leapt to her feet and whirled around, her dress flowing out around her pretty little ankles. “Now we can teach her to dance!” Her hips swayed seductively side to side as her arms snaked through the air.

“I do not care to learn,” I responded. Standing up, I moved away from the other Brides. “I do not want to learn anything you have to teach me. I just want to be who I am.”

“You are one of us now,” Cneajna stated.

“True, but I do not have to be like you, do I?”

“There are certain things our husband expects. To dance for him is one of these things.”

Ariana spun about, her arms above her head, her hands tracing intricate designs. “I love to dance!”

“You look so lovely when you do,” Cneajna assured her. She reached out and caught Ariana’s hand as she danced by.

Ariana giggled with delight and embraced her.

I made a face. “Well, then, you can dance and I shall watch.”

“He will not like that,” Elina said from the shadows.

“I do not care what he likes,” I said rather haughtily.

“You should, because if you do not do as he wishes, he will make your life so miserable you will wish you had never been born.” Elina appeared on the edge of the darkness, her eyes glinting with red fire.

“Maybe I already do.” I moved across the room to an old worn divan. Reclining on it, I pointedly ignored Cneajna’s disapproving gaze and Elina’s angry one.

I was growing frustrated within the confines of the castle. The madness was gone, but now I knew the torment of sanity. My former life was a distant beautiful memory and my new life consisted of this damned castle. Now I had to figure out how to survive this place until I found a way to escape. My brief existence thus far as a Vampire was torment after torment. I was obviously a slave to Vlad Dracula and learning the rules of this place was so tiresome. The fact that I had to change out of my real clothes and into an outfit, that in my opinion, made me look like a Middle Eastern whore, was frustratingly stupid. I had escaped one restrictive society to find myself trapped in another. Another of life’s cruel ironies.

The desire to feed was a torment that yielded what little pleasure there was in this world. I considered the gypsy girl to be my first kill even though I had been forced to take my mother’s life. In retrospect, I had enjoyed the hunt and the rush of power the feeding had given me when I had killed the girl who had taken my ring. That, in itself, was somewhat disturbing.

Rolling onto my side, I extended one foot to stare at a sparkling anklet. Heathens, I thought. They're such heathens.

Then I began to giggle to myself. And what was I? A vampire! How much more heathen could you get than that?

Bless me Father for I have sinned.

What is your sin, my child?

I'm a vampire whore who drinks the blood of young gypsy women and feels no regret.

Oh, yes, that would be fabulous. I could see the Priest's flabbergasted expression now. If I ever escaped, I was rather tempted to go and do just that.

I furrowed my brow.

Could I enter a church?

Sighing, I jiggled my foot, listening to the sweet tinkling of the tiny bells on my anklet. So many questions and such a long time to learn the answers.

The door to our chambers swung open. Ilona's small frame was silhouetted in the doorway.

"The Master desires company tonight within his bed chamber," Ilona said.

I felt my breath catch in my throat as I swung about on the divan. Ariana had stopped in mid-turn of her dance, and Cneajna sat up a little taller in her chair. Elina merely smiled as she stepped firmly into the firelight.

Ilona ventured a few steps into the chamber, holding her lantern high above her head.

"Who has he called?" Cneajna asked the question softly, almost reluctantly.

"The new Bride."

They all looked at me sharply.

"Come along," Ilona said to me.

"Me? Why me? What does he want?"

"Why her?" Elina said at exactly at the same time as my outburst.

Cneajna reached out her hand to me. "You must go to our husband and love him."

I recoiled from her. "I certainly will not. I do not love him. You go!"

"Mistress, he asked for the new Bride," Ilona said anxiously.

"Of course she will go." Cneajna grasped my hand, pulling me off the divan and toward the door. "You must go. It is your duty."

"Duty be damned! I will not go," I retorted. "I will not let him touch me ever again!"

Cneajna turned me about, shaking me angrily. "Do not defy me! Do not defy him! You will go!"

"I will not!" I stomped my foot. "I refuse!"

"Yes, you will, for if you do not go, he will starve us. Do you understand me? He will starve us! We will not feed. We will grow frail and ravenous and go mad!" Cneajna's eyes were flashing with anger and desperation at the mere

thought. "Either you go or we starve."

"But why does he want her?" Elina glared at me.

I covered my face with my hands, completely overwhelmed. What horror was this? Not to feed! How quickly I had come to crave the blood that renewed my life. It was a desire like no other: dark and ravenous. Instinctively, I knew I could not bear not to feed.

"Do you understand? We cannot feed without him. He gives us our life," Cneajna said in a voice barely above a whisper.

"You stupid little whore! It is an honor to be called to the Master!" Elina's voice was like a slap. "How dare you defy him!"

"Elina, please!" Cneajna motioned her back. "Do not complicate this!"

I felt so desperately trapped. To be brutalized by that monster was the last thing I desired, but I could already feel the faint, yet sharp twinges of the coming hunger. I could not bear to not feel the sweetness of the blood giving me new life.

I clenched my fists tightly. "I will go."

"That is wise, my dear child," Cneajna said with relief and tenderly caressed my face with one hand. "You are learning our ways."

"I have no choice." My voice was grim, and I felt close to tears.

"Come along now. The Master is waiting." Ilona motioned toward the door with her lantern.

Taking a deep breath, I followed the old gypsy out of the chambers of the Brides. I was beginning to understand all too well that the passions of my new existence were dark and painful. The yearning to quench the burning vampire hunger and the desire to tear myself free of my Master's power were forceful violent emotions raging in my being. Emotions burning with ferocity I had never experienced before. Now a new fearsome, paralyzing emotion wrapped cold chains about me.

Fear.

Stark, ugly, unrelenting fear.

My limbs felt leaden as I followed Ilona to the Master's chambers. A deeply piercing cold washed over me, my facial muscles constricting tightly. I was sure I was going to retch, but my new vampiric body had nothing to release. My already clasped hands tightened their grasp, my long nails digging into the flesh of my pale arms.

Ilona's lantern threw faded beams of yellowed light into the darkness. The light seemed so weak that the shadows barely cringed away. This new world was of infinite darkness.

And fear.

Such horrible fear.

Ilona stopped before the battered countenance of an ancient door. "The Master awaits within."

I desperately searched for an exit from this madness, but there were only shadows, the forlorn wail of a distant wolf, and the thundering of my own thickly beating heart. A heart that slowly faded as the blood of my victim lost its potency.

“There is no escape from the Master,” Ilona warned, her dark eyes piercing. “None.”

“Open the damn door, wench, and be done with it!”

She shrank back at my hiss and the sight of my sharp teeth.

I would suffer my desecration, then flee back to my vampire sisters. It was vividly apparent that I would have to endure the humiliation and pain of Vlad ravaging my body once more.

She turned the latch, and the door swung open.

“Come,” Vlad’s voice commanded from within.

As I passed by Ilona, I flicked my gaze toward her. She tried to hold her ground and stare me down. “I will not forget this,” I said, and was rewarded with the slight trembling of her bottom lip.

I glided into the room, the firelight catching the fiery shimmer of my hair and the sparkling in the depths of the many jewels decorating my body. My eyes were hard and fierce, fear hiding behind my anger.

“Ah, my new Bride. Now you appear as you should. Much better.” His tone was lightly clipped and his polite façade from an hour before was slipping away. His eyes were darkly menacing and his lips bore a cruel sneer. “Why have you kept me waiting?”

“I did not want to come,” I answered truthfully.

Ilona shut the door behind me, and I heard the distinct sound of the door locking.

He laughed. “Yes, I assumed as much.” He sat by the fire that raged within the fireplace. His eyes were cold and malevolent. “You are a strong willed creature. I shall enjoy breaking you.”

“I-“ I began to retort.

In a blur, Vlad was across the room. His arms clamped about me painfully as his full lips crushed against mine. I tried to scream but my mouth was being ground against his. I could feel his fangs ripping across my lips and my own fangs descending. Trying to push him back, my long nails ripped the fine black silk of his clothing.

Suddenly, I was alone, my hands flailing at cold empty air. Vlad’s laughter filled the chamber.

“Such a spirited girl. Such a lovely conquest,” his voice taunted from the shadows.

I whirled about, searching for my foe. The ancient bed, the burning fire, the dragon banner, the narrow windows, all spun by as I tried to spot my Master, spinning and spinning in desperation. The room appeared empty, I alone

inhabiting this room of decaying grandeur. And yet, his low, angry laughter taunted me.

He seized me from behind, his hands closing over my breasts, his sharp teeth ripping into my throat. I screamed in horror as his long nails sank into the soft flesh of my breasts and blood began to stain my dress. My hand closed on the long, thick coils of his auburn hair and frantically tried to pull him from me.

His strong body pushed me forward toward the bed. Hissing, I tried to push back against him. It only fueled my anger when I realized he was much stronger than I. I could feel his heart beating against my chest, and I knew he had fresh blood pumping his heart. My heart was sluggish and cold. I was enraged by the thought of him feasting so he would be the stronger.

His long tongue licked hungrily at the wound he had inflicted on my throat and it repulsed me.

“Let go of me!”

Again, I found myself suddenly alone. Half fallen on the bed, my hand closed over the wound on my neck. Beneath my trembling fingers, I felt the ragged edges of the torn flesh drawing close.

“Let me be!” I was shaking violently from anger and fear. My voice wavered and that made me angrier.

“Never,” his voice hissed.

There was a flash of blue fire then I was on my back, pinned to the rotting bedclothes of the bed. Screaming in rage, I flailed against the vampire, but he paid me no heed. He was biting me savagely all over my body, drawing blood that pooled in the wounds. To me, his tongue seemed too long, like a snake’s, as it lapped away my blood, my life.

“Damn you,” I screeched and ripped at his face with my nails.

But our bodies were not longer human. Every wound seemed to almost immediately draw closed and the vampire flesh absorbed every drop of blood that was not licked away.

Vlad’s long hands slid between my legs and tried to part them. With renewed strength, I slammed my fist into his face. His cheek split open, blood splashing over my body. I felt a rush of strength as my skin absorbed his blood, and my heart beat more fiercely in my chest with renewed vigor. Vlad hissed at me angrily and struck me so hard my world went black.

My awareness came abruptly back when I felt him pierce me. Gasping in pain, I grabbed hold of his hair and pulled his head back sharply. Thrashing about beneath his body, I tried to free myself. He was thrusting into me with frustrating ease. I screamed in his face and bared my fangs. He laughed as nothing I tried seemed to be able to prevent his violation of my body.

Screaming in rage, I began to beat on him with all my might. Ripping and shredding flesh with my long nails, biting and tearing at his face with my teeth, I fought with all that I had within me.

Still he panted and heaved with dark pleasure above me.

Then, all at once, my rage left me.

My hands fell away from their assault and I lay there as though dead. Now every movement within me was painfully apparent. My rage had buffered me, but now I felt every minute detail of my desecration. His body bearing down on me, his long hair whipping my face, my body rocking with his every movement.

“Leave me,” I whispered.

There was no reply.

My screams were no longer verbal. They were violent, enraged silent screams echoing through the emptiness within me. A blessed darkness filled my mind’s eyes, a barren place to hide within. A hollow void to fill with my pain and terror. My gaze grew distant as I fell away within myself, the only sound my rapidly beating heart. There was a serene silence in this void. I could hide here, away from the world of physical torment.

“Do not defy me!”

Reality came swimming back as my head impacted with the wall the second time. Vlad had me up against the wall beside the bed. His face was enraged.

“Do not ever do that again!”

I was confused for a moment, his nakedness, the pain cutting through my abdomen, the ache between my thighs, and his crazed expression not fitting coherently in my mind. Then I became aware that I was grasping the tattered remains of my dress in my hands and pressing the bundle protectively against my sex.

“You raped me!”

He growled at me, his wolfen teeth sharp and gleaming. “I took what was mine.”

“I am not yours,” I said firmly.

He slapped me violently. “You will do as I say. You will not ignore me again. I called your name four times and you did not answer.”

“I did not want to hear your voice! I do not want you touch me! I hate you!” I was trembling with fear and anger. I felt violated: utterly and completely violated. And I was angry. Angry that I was weaker. Angry that I was afraid. Angry that my own body betrayed me. The sick pleasure I had derived from his violation of my body was too awful to bear. I could still feel the pleasing sting between my legs. I felt like a whore.

Vlad’s face was twisted in anger, his eyes burning with red fire, his full lips pulled back from his long fangs. “Hate me if you like, but do not ignore me.”

His body was too close to mine. I could not bear to feel or see his nakedness. It made me feel filthy. Shrinking back against the wall, I averted my face.

He slapped me again. “Look at me.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. Why could he not just let me be?

Grabbing handfuls of my hair, he slammed my head against the wall again,

pain ripping through my skull. "I shall do this until you open your eyes."

I forced myself to look up into his fierce countenance. He is the devil, I thought.

Vlad pressed his dark face against mine, licking my trembling lips. "You disgust me, my dear Bride," he whispered. "Such a tempting woman, such a terrible lover."

I was trembling, the pressure of his body against mine making me squirm. "I do not want you to touch me. I hate you."

A low malevolent laugh sent chills through me.

"I never said I wanted you to love me."

Yanking me about by my hair, he swung me across the room. Slamming into the wall, I hung there, clutching the cold stones with my hands.

"I made you my Bride. Act as such."

I slid off the wall and forced myself to look at him. "No, not a Bride. You made me into your whore!"

Vlad began to laugh with amusement, his fangs glimmering in the firelight. "A whore? Really? Every female aristocrat is a whore on her wedding night! Sold by her family for prestige and wealth."

I stood shakily, determined to stand my ground. "You slaughtered my family."

"I liberated you from them. They would have sold you to any old bastard with money."

"Be silent!"

Vlad stretched out his long vampire body, rippling with fine muscles. "I am a god to my people. A savior that surpasses all others. You," he pointed at me, "are honored above all other women."

"I am cursed!"

"A curse is a blessing that is not appreciated," Vlad retorted. "I like you much better this way. Alive with English pomp!"

"You stole my purity!"

"And Christian morality! Tell me, Glynis, were you a good girl who said her prayers every night and attended church faithfully?" He was laughing at me, his rage fading from his features.

I felt my gut boiling with anger. "You stupid bastard! I hate you and I will never stop hating you!"

Vlad moved a few steps toward me, menacing and dark. "Your words mean nothing to me."

"I will never come to you again willingly!"

"I do not care."

"You will have to drag me in here!"

"Then I will drag you in here."

"You will have to force me!"

“Then I will!” He grabbed me by my throat. “You do not seem to understand, my dear Glynis. You are my possession to do with as I please. How you feel about what I decide to do with your beautiful body is of no importance to me. I do not want your love or your adoration. It would be pleasant, yes, but I do not require it.” Vlad’s face drew close to mine. “But I do want you to give me the respect that I am due. If you ever ignore me again, I will tie you down and give you to the gypsy men. They know that there is no finer pleasure than lying down with a female vampire. I have done it to another.”

“I will kill you,” I voiced softly in a tone that was deadly as well as sincere. “I will find a way and I will kill you. I promise you that.” I stared directly into his eyes.

His eyes narrowed. “Many have tried.” Releasing me, he moved back to the bed and languidly lay across it. “Leave.” He gestured toward the door and I heard the audible click of the lock.

I needed no further order. I ran to the door and pulled on the latch. To my relief, it did open. Fleeing into the darkened corridor, I felt tears on my face. Dashing haphazardly up crumbling staircases and across rotting floors, I made my way back to the chambers of the Brides. With relief, I saw the firelight trickling into the hall and the sound of Ariana singing in her high soprano voice. I stumbled into the main chamber.

Ariana stopped in mid-verse and Cneajna looked up from her needlework. Only Elina did not turn to view me, haggard and panting, in the doorway.

“Glynis!”

I rushed to Cneajna and fell at her feet, burying my face in the folds of her gown.

Gently, she leaned over me, smoothing my tangled red tresses. “My dearest, do not cry.”

Ariana hurried over and crouched beside me. “What is wrong, sweet sister? Why do you cry?”

“She could not satisfy our husband,” Elina declared from where she stood. “And he beat her for it.”

“Is that true?” Cneajna smoothed my hair with her fingers. “Did he beat you?”

“He raped me! The monster raped me!” I raised my face to her, pleading for her understanding.

A look of bewilderment crossed over her face. “I do not understand.”

Ilona appeared in the doorway. “The Master is waiting.”

“I will not go back,” I screamed at her.

“He calls for Ariana and Elina,” Ilona answered me.

“I told you!” Elina looked triumphant. “She could not satisfy him. Come, Ariana, our husband awaits us.”

Ariana gave me a quick kiss on the cheek and hurried out after Elina.

Alone now, Cneajna held me close, gently rocking me in her embrace.

“Was he displeased with you?”

“He raped me! He forced me to-to-“

“You resisted our husband?” Cneajna sounded absolutely horrified.

“I did not want him to violate me!”

“But he is your husband! That is his right!”

“But it is my body! What about my right?”

Cneajna tilted her head, her brows lowering. “I do not understand, my dearest. I do not understand how you could refuse him.”

I began to sob even more as I realized that Cneajna truly did not understand my degradation.

“There, there,” Cneajna whispered sounding very much like my poor dead father. “I am here. I will not leave you. You are not alone.”

I wept in Cneajna’s arms taking what comfort I could from the woman who was my vampire mother. But contrary to her words, I knew I was alone. More alone than I could have ever believed possible.

Chapter 12

The Journal of Sir Stephen Sheridan

18th of July, 1819

I am most distressed.

This morning as I strode across the fine marble floors of my offices, I felt that something was oddly amiss in the world. I approached my secretary with a certain sense of anxiety. He immediately presented me with today’s post. Retiring to my office, I began to sort through the letters with trembling hands.

Ever since I found out my wife posted a letter for Edric just before he and his family left for Count Dracula’s castle, I have lived in dire dread. It had been Dracula’s express desire that no one should know of the Wrights' destination. If Edric mentioned in his letter to his son that he was on his way to Dracula’s castle, it could cause complications.

As I feared, a letter from the Viscount came into view. I ripped open the letter and read at once:

Dear Father, Mother, May and Glynis,

Angeline and I miss you dreadfully. I do so hope you depart soon for home. We have just learned that Angeline is with child and we both would like it very much if you could be here for the birth.

All is well with the estate. We finished the addition to the stables and have begun digging the new well. Our businesses are running quite well and I will not bore you with the details.

How did things go with Count Dracula? Did he have a fine castle? I suppose there will be no marriage. No offense, Glynis, but I am sure you did something to displease him. Do not fret, Mother. Lord Nigel is asking after her again. See, Glynis, we will marry you off in good time.

I shall keep this short, but will write again soon. I shall await your response.
With much love and great affection,
Andrew and Angeline

And then, to my dismay, I saw a letter with the distinctive red wax seal imprinted with a D. Ripping it open, I felt a great burden of fear descend upon me. For it read:

My dear friend,
Meet me in Bistrița in a fortnight. There is much to discuss.
Your Friend,
D.

Somehow, he knows. I feel it. All is doomed and I know not what to do!

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright
The Castle
23rd of August, 1819

I am caught up in my journal now. I have reached the point where I shall now record events as they occur. Sadly, this does not bring me much peace, for I am still trapped in hell.

Tonight, I stood beside Elina on the decaying battlements of the castle. The Carpathians spread out before us in all their dark majesty. I was hungry and my vision was no longer as sharp as it had been.

Vlad has not made an appearance in the chapel for several days. None of us has seen him when we retire or when we rise. Of course, I have been off secretly writing in my journal, so I was avoiding the lot of them. It was not until Elina stood in the ruined chapel and said in a frightened voice, "He is not here" that I realized Vlad was missing. Cneajna and Ariana had woken before us and were not about. Alone, we gazed at each other warily.

"We should look for him," she said to me.

I had agreed.

Elina and I searched the castle only to realize he was no longer with us.

"When did he leave I wonder?"

She glanced at me. "A few days ago. At least that is what I assume. That is when the gypsies stopped entering the castle. We should have realized then. They always lock the doors and stay away when he travels."

I smiled, joyful at the thought of being rid of Vlad for awhile. I utterly despise him and this was absolutely wonderful. “Well, that is fine with me. But, why do they not enter to serve us as they do Vlad?”

Elina eyed me with disdain. “Because they fear us. Soon the hunger will come and we will go mad. The gypsies know they will be in danger.”

My eyes grew wide at the thought of starvation. We had fed four nights ago on an unlucky hunter. The hunger pangs were already beginning to throb and my heartbeat was sluggish. I felt the life draining away and knew we would have to feed soon. I realized that without Vlad bringing us some luckless mortal, our confinement within the castle would only bring us starvation. I had been so relieved to discover that Vlad was gone I had not realized the full implications his absence had wrought upon us.

Ariana emerged from the stairwell and danced across the cold stones. The night sky was breathtaking tonight. Not one cloud hid the stars from our view. Ariana was humming a lullaby to herself, but when she saw my expression, she stopped dancing.

“What is wrong?”

“We searched the entire castle. Every room. Every hallway. Every hidden room. Everywhere. Our Master is not here. His traveling cases are gone,” Elina responded.

“I went and peered down at the stables. The carriage is gone. That is why we have not seen him for days,” I added.

“I just thought he had not the desire to love us,” Ariana said softly.

“How long will he be gone?” I looked to Elina.

“I do not know. He comes and goes like this often. We never know when he will return,” she answered, her face drawn and fierce.

Ariana began to wail and fell to her knees. Sobbing hysterically, she pummeled the floor with her tiny fists. “I do not want to starve!”

“He shall return before then,” Cneajna said confidently from behind us. “He promised me before he left.”

I whirled around, my eyes glowing with unspoken anger. “Why did you not tell us he had left us?”

Elina hissed with anger. “How could you keep this from us?”

Ariana just wailed.

“He promised that he will return tomorrow night. There was no reason to worry you.”

“He does not always return when he says! He has starved us before! Why did you not ask him to release us to roam the valley below?” Elina’s voice was ripe with fury.

“He did not want Glynis to be away from the castle, therefore, none of us could leave.”

All three looked at me, and I stepped back. “I do not understand any of this.”

“Usually, he releases us as far as the valley so we can hunt for ourselves. But because you are his new prize, he did not free us this time. And we will starve.” Elina folded her arms over her breasts, frowning deeply.

“He will return. He promised me.” Cneajna lifted her head haughtily. “I am the First and he would not lie to me.”

“He has before and he will again. We are going to starve.” Elina brushed past the blonde vampire and disappeared into the darkness of the castle.

Cneajna looked down at Ariana, who was grunting and sobbing at her feet, then up at me. “He promised me. He will return.”

I began to laugh at her blind devotion. I could not believe this miserable world. Scant minutes before I had been exhilarated at the thought of being free from the dark moods of Vlad, but now I yearned for his return. I was terrified of the hunger slowly blossoming within me.

“He will return,” Cneajna insisted, but her own doubt was creeping into her melodic voice.

Ariana mumbled to herself as she crawled across the floor. She reached out to Cneajna and grabbed hold of her skirts. “Mother, Mother, please, call him back! Call him back!”

I shook my head in disgust, turning away. Crawling on top a pile of rubble, I stared down at the silvery sparkling waters of the river that wove its way through the valley below. The cool breeze flowed over my flesh, calming my soul. I could still hear Ariana crying behind me, but I ignored her.

When the hunger comes, there will be plenty of time for tears.

For now, we wait.

The Journal of Sir Stephen Sheridan-- Bistrița

24th of August, 1819

Tonight was abominable. I do not know how I survived.

Earlier this evening-

As I stared pensively out the front window of the Golden Krone Hotel, awaiting the arrival of my lord and Master, Count Vlad Dracula, I sipped burning brandy that did little to soothe my nerves. The letter from Andrew Wright felt heavy in my coat pocket.

In all my years of serving the Count, I have never borne the brunt of his anger, and I did not anticipate enduring it now. I had seen him unleash his wrath against those who failed him with a brutality that is terrifying. Now, I feared I would fall victim to his anger.

A thick fog rolled slowly down the street, dark and menacing as it undulated in great waves over the flagstones. I knew this could only mean one thing. The Master had arrived. I took a deep breath as my heart began to race. Black horses waded through the gloom drawing a carriage up to the front entrance of the hotel.

I set down my drink and hurried to the front door. An employee of the hotel

rushed to open the carriage door, and I anxiously followed him. Running a hand over my hair, I tried to steady my nerves and look presentable to the Count. He is, after all, a very particular man.

The door opened and, instead of descending, the Count's long, cruel hand slid out of the darkness within the carriage to beckon me. I quickly clambered up into the carriage as the driver began to toss down heavy traveling bags.

The Count sat comfortably in the darkness, his auburn hair falling to his waist in curls. Dressed impressively in a black evening suit, he stroked his short beard thoughtfully as he regarded my expression. I quickly kissed the large ring on his hand and took the seat across from him.

"Master, it is good to see you."

"My dear friend, you seem worried." The cold green eyes stood out vividly in the darkness.

I took a deep breath and quickly found I was unable to continue. I was utterly terrified.

"Come now. Tell me. What has happened? I can tell by your demeanor that all is not well. Is something amiss in my business dealings?"

"No, sir, no. It is just that a matter has come to my attention that concerns your plans to move to England." I reached into my coat pocket and handed the Count the letter I had received from Andrew Wright.

"What is this?" The Count took the letter, his long nails seeming particularly threatening this night. Count Dracula opened the letter and read it with some interest. I saw his brows knit together and my hands began to tremble. "I thought I told you that no one was to know of the Wright's visit to my castle."

"You did, sir. But my wife was given the letter the day they departed and she did not consult with me. She posted the letter without my knowledge."

He frowned at me. "You should have more control over your wife, my friend."

I feared for Maria in that moment and gulped down a desperate breath of air. "I should have told her to hand over all the letters to me. I do apologize, sir."

He slightly waved his hand at me. "I advise you to make it clear to your beloved wife that you are her master. I will not have her interfering in my plans again."

"Yes, sir. I understand, sir. I will make it quite plain to her upon my return home. But, sir, I do not know what to do. I do not know how to respond to his letter." My words were rushed in a trembling voice. I despised myself for being so afraid, but the Master always instills fear in me.

The Count sat back in his seat, the leather rustling beneath him, and sighed. "I had confidence in you, Stephen. It is such a shame you have failed me in this one simple request."

"I'm terribly sorry, sir. More than I can ever say."

"Well, it is of no matter. I think I shall be able to use this situation to my

advantage. Yes, yes, it may be a blessing. Perhaps I shall be able to leave for England sooner than I expected.” The Count smiled, his pearl fangs glinting. “Now, get out of my carriage. The night is young, and I wish to enjoy the pleasures of the city.”

“Of course, sir!” I hurriedly climbed out. “Shall we speak later, sir?”

“Yes. Then we can discuss business.” The Count fell back into the shadows of the carriage as the door shut.

With a sharp order from the driver, the horses trotted on and the carriage of Count Dracula rolled into the foggy night.

Delighted by my narrow escape, I allowed myself a small sigh of relief before rushing back into the hotel.

Later, he arrived looking quite rosy of face, his eyes glinting with a keen fever, and I knew he had fed well. We sat together in my hotel room to discuss his business and his demeanor was refreshingly cordial. I sat at a small desk and he sat across from me, tapping the writing paper lightly with one finger.

“You will write to Andrew Wright and inform him of the most unfortunate event that befell his family in route to my home. There was a terrible storm and their carriage was swept off the road into the river. Only his sister, Glynis, survived, and she is in my care. She has been horribly injured, but I am tending to her medical needs.”

I wrote down all that he instructed me, my fingers slightly trembling. “You... you did make her... what you are?”

“Yes, I did.”

“I do not understand...if she is a vampire, then why not say she is dead as well?”

“After a time, Glynis will recover, and I will marry her. Or so her brother will think. Then we shall enlist his aid in moving his beloved sister and her husband to England.” The Count smiled wolfishly. “You see, it quite works out.”

I could see, that yes, he was right.

As I sink further into his deceit, I find that I am relieved that it is not me who will suffer at the hands of Count Dracula. Tomorrow we travel to Buda to set our plans in motion.

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

27th of August, 1819

I shall try and describe the hell we endured in his absence...

Our screams have rent the night since we woke in the throes of the hunger. I was the first to run to the great doors and beat upon them with my fists. I heard my sisters rushing behind me and turned.

Ariana ran dreamily down the long staircase, her long white gown flowing around her like great wings. She looked like an angel and, for a mad moment, I wished she would carry me up to heaven out of this hell.

Elina threw herself over the railing of the great staircase, her hair fanning around her like a black halo. Cneajna fell to her knees in the center of the grand foyer, screaming. I smashed my fists against the enormous door that led to the outside world.

The hunger was driving us to insanity.

Trapped in the castle for days, the gypsies safely locked out, we have been starving. Since Vlad had abruptly left us alone, deliberately chained to this dark corrupt castle by his power, we had not fed. We could not escape to feed and we were on the verge of madness.

Our bodies and faces had thinned, and we looked strangely inhuman. Our eyes were deep-set, our limbs sinewy. Our hearts had ceased to beat and our bodies became a pale gray. We looked like wraiths. Elina landed beside me and raked her nails feverishly over the darkened wood, splinters tearing into her fingers. We were desperate and beyond reason.

Ariana ran down the stairs, her hands clutching an ancient sword. Rushing past Cneajna, she raised it over her head, jamming it into the lock.

“Help me! Help me!”

I was weeping; the hunger so painful that I felt I was being ripped apart into tiny pieces. Grasping the hilt, I helped Ariana in her attempt to pry open the lock. Elina joined her hands with ours, and together we tried to break open the doors.

Cneajna huddled on the floor behind us, clawing at her hair in despair. I felt the metal began to bend, and I cried out with relief. “It is opening!”

Cneajna threw herself at us and grabbed hold of the sword. We were all so very weak. Together we strained as the metal slowly bent and the wood splintered.

“There! We have done it!” Elina exclaimed, her fingers tugging at the giant latch. The sword clanged to the stone floor. I pulled on the door with all my might and it swung open on rusted hinges.

“Yes! Yes!” Cneajna gasped in delight.

The crisp night air fanned over us as we crouched together in the doorway. The invisible barrier erected by Prince Vlad’s dark powers still kept us from racing into the night, but somehow, just seeing the evening sky hovering over the courtyard gave us a measure of solace.

But the hunger still raged within us.

“We will starve. If no one comes, we will starve!” Elina collapsed to her knees, clutching the door in anguish.

Ariana began to wail with fear and hunger.

I pressed my body against the power holding us captive. I could not break through it. Screaming, I pressed my body against the invisible shield and wept.

The Journal of Sir Stephen

4th of September, 1819

Count Dracula's new plans are now set in motion. He seems quite pleased with the situation, and I can only feel a sense of relief. Despite my admiration for the man, I do admit that he frightens me deeply. That he could take our potentially difficult predicament and use it to serve his purposes is a profound reminder that he was once a great Prince of Wallachia.

After all had been settled in Buda, it was decided that we would travel back to the castle together. I would then continue on alone to see to the sale of one of his properties to finance his newest endeavor. I was not very comfortable traveling such a great length with the Prince, but I fortified myself with the thought of regaining his trust. Throughout our time together, I have noticed him watching me with acute scrutiny. It frightens me terribly. I am determined to sweep away any mistrust he may have in me.

Leave it to an infernal woman to cause me such despair!

Count Dracula was surprisingly entertaining during our trip. He recounted many of his great exploits in years past without the usual bitterness he expresses when remembering all the betrayals he suffered as a mortal. I admit his joviality frightened me somewhat. It was so unexpected. I suppose I have become accustomed to his arrogance and his sharpness. To see him smile so widely was rather unnerving.

Perhaps it is because he is no longer a man, but it always startles me how easily he sits in a swaying and jolting carriage. I sat across from him, holding tightly to the safety straps, fearing for my very life. Yet he sat there, talking to me, gesturing casually, his green eyes glinting at me.

I am certain he was amused by my white knuckles and terrified expression.

Then, suddenly, he became quite amused. His disturbing laugh filled the darkness of the carriage as we traveled toward the decaying remains of his once impressive castle.

"They are really in quite an uproar. Screaming and carrying on." Count Dracula chuckled as he slapped his gloves against my knee. "Women!"

I forced a laugh, not certain what he was speaking of.

"I hear my wives. They are quite upset that I have been gone for so long," he said.

"Oh, yes. Your wives! I only have one wife, thank goodness. You have three! How do you stand it? Women can be so insufferable."

"Four wives," the Count said. "Remember, Glynis is now my Bride. And yes, they are all insufferable in their own way."

I tried not to look uncomfortable, and nodded. "Oh, yes, Lady Glynis. I was rather surprised that you...changed her. I mean, sir, I know that you said you fancied her, but I thought perhaps the hunting was rather scarce up here and you needed..." I faltered in my words. I always grow nervous when discussing the vampire thirst for blood. Though I have served Count Dracula for more than

twelve years now, I am always aware of the possibility of him turning on me.

Count Dracula flashed his long teeth as he smiled. "My dear friend, the hunting is always good up in the mountains. Especially now that the British Empire has expanded and young English aristocrats are exploring the world. I rather like the English. Their rational minds will not accept what their eyes see. It is rather amusing to hear them screaming that I do not exist."

I shifted in my seat, uncomfortable with his words. I knew their rationale all too well. "Master, they have not lived in this land. They do not know the secrets I have learned."

"Ah, but I remember your protest, my good friend. I remember when I first came to you for assistance in establishing myself in the world of mortals."

I hate the way Dracula's eyes glow like dark coals in the darkness of the night. The Count was in good humor tonight, his visit to Buda being the success he had desired. But Dracula being in good humor can be even more dangerous than his dark moods. I could tell he was chiding me and playing with me like a mere child. But perhaps that is all I am when compared with his great years.

"Oh, yes," I said, trying to smile. "I was foolish and naive. But I have served you well, have I not, Master?"

"Yes, you have, my dear friend."

I glanced out of the carriage window. A storm was moving swiftly over the valley, obscuring the moon. "Did you call that storm?"

Count Dracula looked at the dark mass gliding resolutely across the sky and dismissed the storm clouds with a motion of his hand. "No, that one is of God. Did I tell you I sent a rather marvelous storm after the Earl when he tried to escape me with his family?"

"No, you did not. I am sure it was quite impressive." Vastly uncomfortable at the thought of the demise of my friend, Edric, and his family and the significant role I had played, I squirmed in my seat. Now I knew he was trying to make me uncomfortable. His good humor was a mask hiding his disappointment, nay, his anger with me.

"It was lovely. Almost as lovely as my new Bride. She is a most beautiful creature." His eyes narrowed slightly. "Do you not think so?"

"So only Glynis remains, I assume," I said softly, avoiding answering him. I stared at the window at the storm, attempting to distract myself. But I could not. I squirmed, averting my gaze from the Master.

Count Dracula watched me with amusement. "How easily you sent them to me knowing their possible fate. Your guilt does not quite suit you."

I choked for a moment, startled by his words. The Master knew me well. For it was not guilt I felt, but the fear my actions would be discovered by the authorities. "He was a friend, but a friend is not as important to me as you are, Master. I serve you." I knew my words would please him.

He smiled slightly. "And I pay you well."

“Yes, my Master. But beyond the monetary rewards of my service, I cling to your promise of an immortal life. To serve a man such as you for an eternity would be the greatest pleasure. My wife’s father often speaks of your great victories over the Turks.”

Count Dracula smiled, but his eyes remained shrewd and considering as he gazed at me. “Yes, I remember the victories of my mortal life. And one day, I will not remain trapped in my own country, but take my place once more in the halls of power.”

Every time Count Dracula speaks of power, it thrills me, for I capture a glimpse of the world I will one day join.

Since the first time Count Dracula entered my bedroom in the night and seduced me with the promise of immortality, I knew I was destined for greatness. I have labored long and hard for Count Dracula, building up his wealth and once more establishing him in Hungarian society as Count Vlad Dracula, a distant descendent of Vlad Tepes the Impaler, of the Dracul family. I may not be the most handsome of men or the most charming, but I am an aristocrat with connections and a shrewd businessman with all the necessary connections in the mortal world that Count Dracula needs. Over the years, Count Dracula has occasionally spoken of being a prisoner to this land and his desire to move freely in the mortal world, but I cannot understand what he means. He travels to and fro through the empire and wields power that mere men cannot imagine.

I often wonder if there is a vampire society I am not aware of. Is he their ruler? Will I one day - err, night - rule at his side?

I will do anything to protect my position as Count Dracula’s trusted adviser. Even betray an old school chum and his family by sending them to Count Dracula. Edric had been pleasant enough, but I admit, I always resented his great success and wealth. I do feel badly about Antoinetta and May, but that little twit Glynis can suffer her fate. In a moment of weakness, I had tried to plant a kiss on her lovely mouth, but she rebuffed me. She should never be so talkative and witty if she does not expect a man to respond to her seductions. Yes, she deserved her fate, the little tramp. But it is really too bad about the rest of the family.

But I digress...I found Count Dracula staring at me intently. I had been so deep in my own thoughts, I wondered if I had missed part of the conversation.

“Yes, my Master,” I said anxiously.

“You are a cunning man, Stephen. Such dreams you have,” the Count said smiling, then sank back into the shadows of the carriage as only he can do.

I swallowed hard and wondered if he could read my thoughts.

Our escort of armed guards riding on black horses drew up to the carriage. The guards are for me, not Count Dracula. These are dangerous parts. All sorts of horrible deaths await travelers in the Carpathian Mountains, not just at the

hands of the vampires, but thieves, bandits and dangerous bands of Gypsies. Though I know the guards are merely well-dressed mercenaries, I do feel safe within their care.

Thunder churned in the distance and the wind rocked the carriage even more than the treacherous pass we were traveling. But beyond the sounds of the night, I heard something more.

Leaning toward the window, I stared out toward the castle we were quickly advancing on. Faintly, just beyond the edges of my hearing, I heard the strangest of sounds. It was like the gentle sigh of a woman mixed with a raging scream... no...like a seductive song whispered...nay...a low growl. It was confusion to my ears yet alluring. Even now, I cannot describe what I heard.

Count Dracula was virtually invisible in his cloak of shadows, only his ominously glowing eyes visible through the gloom.

I absolutely abhor visiting the castle.

As the carriage turned into the courtyard, Count Dracula's eyes seemed to burn even brighter. "Ah, what is this?"

I leaned toward the window and my breath caught.

The great door to the castle was thrown open and four beautifully exotic women were gathered in the doorway. Their gossamer gowns, pale as the purest moonlight, and their long billowing hair danced around their voluptuous bodies as the cool breeze caressed them. Strange words, whispered and fervent escaped from their blood red lips, their pink tongues darting between glistening white fangs. Arms moving in fluid, seductive motions beckoned to me. The intoxicating sound that wafted on the night breeze called to me.

I found myself fumbling with the carriage door latch, my eyes riveted to the pale beautiful women with the sharp features and blood red lips.

Their voices...their voices...even now..I remember how they whispered to me...

Come to us...

Let us kiss you...

Let us caress you...

We want you...

Desire you...

Need you...

Love you...

Let us love you...

Kiss you...

Taste you...

Even now I feel the heat of their words and, in that horrible moment, I wanted to escape the confines of the damned carriage and throw myself into their waiting arms. Already, I could feel their lips against mine, their hands on my body, their bodies against mine...

“Foolish little man!”

I was struck forcefully and knocked back into my seat. Thank goodness, the Count struck me down in my foolish lust. I still wanted to go to them, but I felt the force of Count Dracula’s power holding me in place.

“I need you, so do not be a fool!”

My body was shivering violently as I blurted out, “But, they called...”

Count Dracula dismissed me with a flick of his hand, and said, “Another fool approaches them.”

A guard moved toward the Brides of Dracula answering their siren call. He nearly stumbled over the body of what appeared to be a hunter prostrate at the feet of the women, but he caught himself. Extending his hands toward them, the handsome, swarthy young man relinquished his life. The Brides caught hold of him and drew him into their arms. Closing in around him, their sly seductive laughter slithered through the air.

I watched in horror, unable to look away. After a long moment, a Bride raised her head and seemed to look directly at me. It took me a few moments to recognize that the beauty with the long rivulet of blood tracing down her chin was the red haired Lady Glynis. It gave me an awful start. I turned away and cowered in the darkness of the carriage. And still, I felt the coldness of her stare.

“I shall be in contact with you soon, my friend,” the Count said coolly.

Count Dracula gracefully descended from the carriage and moved toward the castle. He must have signaled the coachman, for the carriage lurched forward.

I sat back, trembling. Deathly cold fingers traced down my spine. I felt as if I had witnessed my own death. How easily I had almost gone to them. To her! Her gaze upon me has left me cold and only the sight of the rising sun this morning has given me any measure of peace.

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

The Castle

5th of September, 1819

Last night, when Vlad returned, I stood in the doorway and watched the carriage depart carrying the man who had betrayed my family try and hide from my gaze. Sir Stephen had not seemed surprised to see what we truly are and now I fully realize that he sent us to our deaths in service to his Master. The bitter taste of his betrayal made the blood I had consumed lose its flavor and I almost spat on the floor.

Behind me, Vlad stood over the other Brides. I glanced back at him and saw his green eyes glimmering with dark satisfaction.

The unfortunate young man that had answered our call was completely drained of his rich life blood and lay on the floor, nothing more than a pale

bloodless body cluttering up the doorway to the castle. I remember gazing at him almost with disgust. How easily he had come to us.

The Brides slowly gathered about Vlad, cooing and whispering, holding out their hands in supplication, as I stood and watched the carriage disappear.

“You have returned, Master, sweet Master,” Ariana exclaimed emotionally, kissing his hands.

“We longed for your return,” Elina declared breathlessly as she ran her hands over his hair.

“We were starving,” Cneajna dared to say. “We needed you!”

Like fawning cats, they rubbed seductively against him, caressing him with their bodies and hands.

Save for me.

I stood over the dead guard, staring into his hollow eyes.

“Come to me, my Bride,” Vlad called to me.

I lifted my gaze. I knew in that moment they were burning with defiance.

“You must bring us another.”

Vlad hardly seemed to notice my outburst. He amorously kissed Elina with his thick lips.

“Do you hear me? It is not enough, damn you! It is not enough! It is never enough!” I cried in anguish.

The blood of the hunter who had stumbled across us earlier and the guard had made us soft, pale, and rosy once more with our hearts beating in our chest, but still the hunger was there. Clawing, pleading, needing to be fed.

“It is enough for tonight,” Vlad said softly. Staring down into Ariana’s adoring eyes, he gently smoothed her tangled hair. “Tomorrow, I shall bring you another.”

“We need more now! I feel the hunger deep within me! The need is gnawing at me!” I trembled with rage and desire. “We need to feed now.!”

Vlad pointedly ignored me as he caressed his wives’ faces and kissed their lips.

“Do you hear me, you stupid bastard? Call back your carriage and give us those men! Give me Sir Stephen!”

Slowly, Vlad’s darkly burning eyes slid toward me, his most defiant Bride.

“Do not task me, Glynis,” he said in a low, threatening voice.

“You made us what we are. You have starved us since you left. You cannot let us starve any longer!”

“I can do as I please, dear one. I am the Master.”

“Sir Stephen is your servant. Give him to me. Let me feed.”

I had seen Sir Stephen’s frightened eyes as he had gazed at me and beyond that, I had seen his lust. All I wanted was to rip open his throat and feed. Feed on his blood to satiate my hunger and avenge my family.

“He is worth more to me than you know. Hate him if you must, but his blood

is not yours.”

“Damn you,” I whispered in a fierce voice.

Vlad threw back his head and laughed with delight. “You are such a wild creature. You amuse me, but I will break you.” Elina covered his neck with desperate kisses as he spoke. His wives closed in around him, seducing him with their beguiling bodies.

“Just a taste more, my love, a taste more,” Cneajna whispered in his ear.

Vlad just shook his head. “No more tonight, my darlings.”

I screamed at him with rage. I picked up the corpse of the guard and flung it at the writhing vampires. The dead man smashed into Ariana and Elina, knocking them to the floor. Cneajna drew back in fear as Vlad whirled about.

“You will not defy me!”

“Feed us or I will slaughter the servants!”

Yes, I realize now that I was being temperamental, but I was furious. Seeing Sir Stephen brought back the stark reality of his betrayal of my family. Also, I might as well admit, I was disgusted by the fawning attentions of my vampire sisters. I was barely recovering from the agony of our starvation, and I wanted nothing more than to feel full, alive, and strong.

Vlad’s form blurred and I found myself dangling from his grasp. “You will not dishonor me! You will wait for the night to return and then you will feed! If you defy me again, I will lock you in the dungeon with your dead mother and let you starve for weeks! This is not an idle threat, Glynis. I have killed Brides less disrespectful than you.”

To emphasize his point, he slammed me into the wall several times, then flung me across the great hall. I slid to a halt against the wall, my hair splayed out about me. My anger burned in my eyes as Cneajna hurried to my side. I pushed myself up, growling deeply in my throat.

“Do not do it!”

I reluctantly obeyed her, my hands clutching at the stone floor. I craved release. I wanted to let my anger ride me into a wave of violence against all of them.

But I remembered...I remembered what I had promised my Mother. I had to escape this place and defying Vlad would only deter that plan. I did not need to be killed or imprisoned.

Elina wrapped herself around Vlad’s body. “Let me calm you, my Master. Let us leave them.”

Vlad continued to glare at me, then he nodded. “Yes, yes, let us go now.”

He embraced Elina and they dissolved into a fine blue mist. Ariana watched it reverently until the last mote dissipated, then she joined us in the corner of the room.

Slowly, I rose to my knees and gazed at my vampire sisters. My anger still burned inside of me, but my countenance was cold and aloof.

“Tomorrow he will bring us another. That is good, Glynis,” Ariana said, trying to console me.

I nodded, then fell back to the floor. I drew my knees up to my chest and hugged my legs. “I feel the hunger now. It is faint, but there.”

“You will learn to live with it,” Cneajna assured me.

“You really should not defy the Master. He never would have called his men back,” Ariana said softly, patting my arm.

“I wish he had,” I said in a low voice. “I saw the man who betrayed my family in that carriage. I saw his pale scared face and his long white neck. He would have come to us if Vlad had not held him back.”

I could feel my fury burning in my veins, but my vampire sisters did not understand.

“He brought you to us,” Cneajna said softly. “For that I am grateful.”

I gave her a sharp look, then turned away. She could not possibly understand.

It was then that I took another vow in the name of my family.

When I am free of this place, I will go to Buda and I will kill Sir Stephen.

None shall stop me.

Chapter 13

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

The Castle

5th of September, 1819

How did I become this monster...this creature that feasts on the blood of innocents? I stare at my bloodstained dress and feel nothing but hatred for what I have done. To know how callously I killed before and felt no regret, now pains me. I killed before with no remorse. But tonight...tonight, what I have done is unbearable.

I allowed myself to become this hideous fiend. The hunger tears at me, but I must find a way to fight it.

Tonight Vlad disappeared soon after we rose. The hunger was stirring within me and I clung to Vlad's promise that he would feed us once again tonight. I have never been a patient person by nature and tonight was no different. As I scribbled away in my journal, I continuously listened for his return. From where I sat, perched high on a ledge in the great hall, I could watch the male servants busy replacing the front door we had battered to bits. Beyond them, in the courtyard, the wolf pack paced back and forth.

I sensed him before I actually witnessed his arrival in the castle. Ducking back into the shadows, I hid my journal and lay flush against the cold stone. Below me, Vlad entered the castle holding a large sack in one hand. He began to speak to one of the men working on the door, gesturing toward the courtyard.

Taking advantage of him being distracted, I crawled, spider-like, out of my hiding place and down the back of a large column, then leapt onto the stairs and rushed up into the castle.

Bursting into the Brides' chambers, I found the sisters seated on the floor, talking softly as they sorted through a heap of jewelry.

"He has returned," I said breathlessly.

"We are to feed," Ariana squealed happily.

"I did not see anyone with him so perhaps he will let us roam free," I said hopefully. I thought, briefly, of the bag he had held, then I dismissed it from my thoughts.

Cneajna gathered up the tangled jewelry and tossed it onto a table. Smoothing out her dress, she smiled at me. "Our Master will come to us and we will feed. As he promised."

As her words ended, the door opened behind me. Vlad swept in dressed in a cloak, the sack swung over one shoulder.

"You wished to feed tonight, my loves, so I brought you a feast to restore your bodies, your youth, your beauty."

I leaned back against a column and looked at him over my shoulder. His features wore a particularly satisfied expression.

"And where is this feast?" I asked of him. I suspected he was toying with us once more. Giving us false hopes just to listen to us wail with starvation later.

Vlad laughed at my impertinent manner and leaned over to press a kiss against my lips. I turned away from him sharply, so he licked the side of my face with his awful, long tongue. He lowered the bag to the floor and untied the top.

The other Brides gathered around us, whispering with delight among themselves. I looked down at Vlad as he leaned over to open the bag.

What had he brought us? An animal of some sort?

But in my heart, I knew the truth.

The edges of the bag fell away and huddled before us was a small child about the age of three. It was a young boy, his tiny soft limbs browned by the sun, his wide brown eyes staring out at us from beneath the bangs of his brown hair.

"Oh, how lovely he is," Elina exclaimed.

I gripped Vlad's arm and he looked into my eyes. "You wished to feed, did you not, dear wife?"

"We cannot," I protested.

Ariana fell to her knees and gushed over the child, petting his head, tweaking his tear-stained cheeks. "He is such a beautiful little boy!"

"I promised you a fine feast, dear Glynis. Enjoy!" Vlad smirked, turning to leave.

I did not relinquish my hold on his arm as my fingers dug into the fabric of his coat. "We cannot!"

Leaning down, he cocked his head and stared triumphantly into my eyes.

“Ah, but you will.”

Suddenly, my grip was empty. He had merely vanished.

The door to the chambers slammed shut with a loud crack.

I trembled with the horror of what was happening, but I knew I could not stop what was about to happen. The hunger was upon us. Our feeding from the previous night had barely taken the edge from our desperate need. Already, we looked pale and drawn. The need for blood was strong within us all... within me.

Cneajna drew the child into her gentle embrace and kissed his forehead tenderly. Laughing, the Brides gushed over the child and his fear began to fade away. Ariana lifted him high into the air and spun him around until he was gleefully giggling. Elina stole him away from her sister and bounced him on her hip while she sang to him. Cneajna was enraptured by him as she ran her hands over his silken hair and caressed his baby flesh.

I could not move. I froze, clinging to the column by the doorway. It was as if the world had suddenly stopped all motion except for the movements of my vampire sisters. With gay laughter and chilling adoration, the vampire women fussed over the child, hugging and kissing him with affection.

“We cannot,” I whispered in protest.

Cneajna whirled about the room with the child cradled in her arms. Her eyes were bright with the hunger, and I pressed my hand to my mouth in anguish.

The hunger was eating at me with savage desperation.

Ariana took hold of the child and drew him away from Cneajna. Taking his hand, she led him into a little dance. Elina laughed and took his other hand. They danced around in a circle as the child’s laughter echoed through our dark chamber.

“Please, please, we must send him away,” I said. I felt tears on my face while my body burned with the hunger.

Giggling, the child ran away from the Brides and playfully hid behind the furniture in the room, peeking out to smile before he ducked back down. Ariana dropped to her knees, her eyes sparkling dangerously and chased him around a table as the child giggled with delight. Elina caught him in her embrace and kissed his cheek with her dark red lips. She cuddled him up against her and looked at me with slitted eyes. With a small smile, she set him down on the floor, nudging him toward me.

He ran and threw his small, chubby arms around my legs. Stricken, I let my hand fall onto the top of his little dark head. I covered my face with one hand, unable to look into his eager face.

Cneajna hurried after the child as he let go of me and raced away. I felt Ariana brush past me followed by Elina. My sluggishly beating heart felt heavy and painful in my chest. The child ran past me and my hand snagged his shirt. Pulling him into my arms, I kissed his cheek, feeling my long vampire teeth descending behind my lips. He sloppily kissed me back, hugging my neck

tightly. Slowly, I sank to the floor, embracing him. Ariana knelt next to me as Elina settled on the floor, both of them watching with bright, deadly eyes.

The little boy grew silent, his dark eyes staring into mine.

“Sleep now,” I whispered to him. My voice caught in a sob.

Cneajna slowly knelt before me.

“It is her right to begin. She is the first,” Elina said to me.

Sobbing, I held his sleeping form tighter. His body was so warm. I could feel his heart beating in his chest and hear his blood rushing through his veins. My hunger growled within me, and I cried out in anguish.

Reverently, Cneajna took him from my arms. I covered my face with my hands, too horrified to speak. Finally, I lowered my hands to see Cneajna tracing the child’s little lips with her fingertips.

Ariana and Elina drew closer, their eyes burning with hunger.

“We cannot,” I murmured.

Cneajna slowly turned the small head with her fingers exposing its delicate throat.

“It is our way,” she said in a low voice, her fangs suddenly very visible and sharp.

Then the hunger spoke and we fed.

In the aftermath of the feeding, I stumbled through the castle. I wanted to retch but my wretched undead body was already burning the blood to restore my life. Weeping, I pulled at my hair, my dress, and my body. I was in agony and could not find release.

I saw the light seeping through the doorway to the library. Rage gripped me and I burst into the room. I found Vlad dressed immaculately in black reading a book in English. He looked up at me with faint interest, his lips curling up beneath his thick mustache.

“Did you enjoy your feast?”

I could not speak for a moment. My lips trembled as my throat constricted. Shaking, I drew closer to him and finally said, “May God damn you to hell.”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. Such language from a lady even if she is a vampire.” Vlad clucked at me reproachfully and returned to his reading.

I snatched the book out of his hand and flung it away. “A child! A child, Vlad! Innocent and pure! You gave us a child.”

Leaning back, he stroked his mustache lightly, regarded me thoughtfully, and then laughed. “Yes, innocent and pure. And his innocent and pure blood right now courses through you. I see it in your glowing skin, your sparkling eyes, and your glistening hair. So do not complain to me about that which you enjoyed.”

I lunged at him, hitting him with my fists. “I hate you! You are a monster!”

Gripping my wrists, he drew me down to him. I fell to my knees as he leaned into me. The top of his head touched my brow as he whispered, “You are what I am. Do you hate yourself? For if I am a monster, so are you.”

I drew back from him sharply, trying to wrench free from his grip. “No, never! Never!”

He buried his hand in my hair and raised my face to his. Gazing into my eyes, he smiled at me. “But you are, my dearest bride. You are what I am. A monster.”

Tossing me aside, he rose and reclaimed his book. Lying on the floor crying, I gazed up at him. “I will never be what you are.”

“You are a vampire. I am a vampire. We are very much alike, dear Glynis.”

He sat down in his chair and proceeded to read.

Rising to my feet, I stood before him trembling. My tears flowed hot and fierce against my cold cheeks. When I wiped them from my face, I saw they were tinged with blood.

“I refuse to be like you.”

Vlad sighed and closed his book, one long finger keeping his place. “And how shall you accomplish that, my dear Glynis? What shall you do? Refuse to feed?”

“Yes!”

He laughed at my foolish resolve.

“Do not mock me!”

“But you enjoy feeding, do you not?”

I averted my gaze, my mouth setting into a harsh, bitter line.

“You do enjoy feeding, do you not?”

“The hunger compels me...”

“Yes, it does. But, my darling one, the feeding itself, you do enjoy it, do you not? Their blood giving you life. You love it as much as I.”

“Please stop! Please be silent! It is not true!” I did not want to hear his words. They were brutal and they were, unfortunately, true. I was loath to admit it to either one of us, especially, myself.

Vlad slowly stood, laying his book down. Turning to me, he fastened his fierce green eyes upon me and said in a low voice, “Do not lie to me, woman. You are a killer the same as I.”

I turned away from him, hiding my face in my hands. I trembled with the passion of my anger and shame.

“I thought so, dear Lady Glynis.”

The wolves began to howl. Angry voices began to shout from below. I lifted my face to see Vlad standing near the windows, peering down into the night.

“What is it? What is wrong?”

I joined Vlad and gazed down. Several men with torches and rifles were moving toward the main entrance of the castle. A priest was among them carrying a large crucifix. As I gazed upon it, my eyes felt as though hot needles were stinging them. I quickly slid my gaze away from the cross and fastened it on the men warding off the wolves with flaming torches.

Vlad began to chuckle. "Once more they try to defeat me."

"Who are they?" I asked, but turned to find myself alone in the room.

Curiosity seized hold of me, so I rushed out the door and down to the great hall. Who was brave enough, nay, foolish enough, to defy Vlad?

When I reached the great hall, Prince Vlad's heavily armed gypsy guards were already spilling out the front door. Their expressions were fierce and determined as they prepared to defend their Master.

"The priest is mine," Vlad's voice drifted through the air, disembodied and cold.

I rushed toward the open doorway, anxious to see what would happen next. As I reached the courtyard, the gypsy guards opened fire on the villagers. Several of the men fell immediately. Others began to return fire striking one of the gypsy men. With a cry, he fell to the ground. The smell of blood, warm and inviting, began to waft on the night breeze.

The priest began to chant as the gypsy guards approached him, but he was fighting against mortals not vampires. A gypsy seized the crucifix and began to wrestle it from his grasp.

The wolves raced into the courtyard, evading the torches and leaping onto one man who had wandered too far from the rest of the attackers. They overcame him and ripped him to shreds.

The scene was chaotic and brutal. I was dazed by the noise, the violence, and the scent of blood. I stood in the doorway, my mouth agape, unsure of what to do.

A man raced at me, a wooden stake raised high above his head with both hands. He screamed with fury, his face contorted as he bore down, determined to strike me down.

Perhaps it was because I was haunted by my conversation with Vlad in the library, but I reacted in a way that I never anticipated. I grabbed hold of my bodice and ripped it open, exposing my chest. Throwing back my head, I waited for the stake to plunge between my breasts and into my heart, ending my misery. Tears streamed down my face as I gazed upwards, praying fervently that God would let me into the Kingdom of Heaven so I could be with my family.

It was not the pain of death that jolted me out of my self-pitying reverie, but a moan and large, grimy, callused hands grabbing hold of my flesh.

Startled, I staggered back as the filthy man tried to pull my dress down my body. His ugly face strained to reach mine as he fumbled with one of my breasts. Screaming with rage at his violation, I seized hold of his head with both of my hands and twisted his head clear about. There was a loud snap and he fell dead at my feet.

Anger burned in me as I looked up to see several village men stumbling toward me. One shielded his eyes from me, turning away. The others moved toward me, struggling with desire as they were beguiled by my appearance. Yet,

they were prepared to strike me down.

It was then that the heat of my power enveloped me and I understood the magnitude of my new abilities. Despite their fear, despite their desire to strike me down, they wanted me.

I began to laugh at their stupidity. How feeble and weak they were! I extended my arms and a young, handsome creature fell into them. He tried to kiss me, but I yanked his head to the side and bit down savagely. Crushing him against me, I fed deeply, pulling his life blood into my undead body. The blood flowed hot and glorious into me, empowering me, renewing me even as the other men groped at me.

Ariana flitted past me and another man surrendered to her embrace. Elina growled and bit into the throat of another man pawing at me. Cneajna materialized behind the man who had turned away from me and caught his face in her hands. She enraptured him with her gaze and he submitted to her charms.

“Whores of the devil!”

I dropped my dead prey. Wiping the blood from my lips, I saw a man staggering toward me.

Ah, the priest.

Only three villagers remained alive, including the priest. The smell of blood permeated the night air. My sisters had wrestled their prey down to the ground and were noisily feasting. The gypsy men were covered with blood; a few were wounded. Vlad inspired great loyalty.

Without his crucifix, the priest looked smaller, fatter and more pathetic. He stood before me, flushed, angry, and afraid. Drunken with power and blood, I stared at him. He looked like no priest I had ever encountered. His robe was dirty and he stank of liquor.

“You are all damned! All of you are foul disgusting servants of the devil!”

Ariana rolled off her victim and onto her knees. She began to laugh. “And what of you? A real man of God would never be stupid enough to come here in a drunken stupor to kill us when we are awake!”

The two remaining villagers were trembling with terror, their eyes wide. Yet, despite their fear, they stood straight and defiant, averting our gaze, clearly stronger willed than the others.

“You took a child from the village,” one of them shouted, spittle flecking his lips and beard.

“Our husband brought him to us. We would have returned his body for holy burial,” Cneajna said coldly.

“Your husband is Dracul! The devil!”

I laughed at the priest’s words. They were so terribly accurate.

Vlad emerged from the thin air, a shadow swirling into solidity, and stood before the men. “Yes, I am Dracul, the dragon, the devil. And I told you and your people to stay away from this place.”

“You took a child!”

“His father owed me a debt. Did he not tell you? He came to me pleading for money. We entered a business transaction and I informed him that I would collect what was owed me when I so desired. He never asked my price. He did not want to know what he would have to surrender to me.”

“You swore that you would not take our people if we sent the travelers to you!” a man shouted at Vlad.

My gaze flicked toward him, and I frowned at his words.

“The agreement still stands,” Vlad assured him. “This was a far more personal exchange. It does not include the village. But look what you have done. You have stormed my castle, killed some of my men, attempted to rape my wives, and you bring this poor drunken bastard with you.”

Ariana giggled and waggled her fingers at the priest as she sidled up to Vlad. “He is not very scary is he, Master?”

“Yes, it is a pity the former priest died. He was a worthy opponent. That is why he died in peace and not by my hand. I could not touch him.”

Two gypsy women strode out of the castle, dragging long wooden stakes behind them.

The priest bristled at Vlad’s words. “I am your equal! Do not doubt that, sir!”

Vlad laughed. “You are not a worthy opponent. Do not flatter yourself. Even now your eyes stray to my wife.” He reached out and took hold of my arm. He pulled me to his side. “Does not her vampire flesh glow with such lovely radiance?”

The other two men deliberately looked away, but the Priest looked straight at me. I caught him in my power and his mouth dropped open, a slight trickle of saliva trailing down his chin.

I felt flush with power as I watched his reaction. These mortal men wanted me so badly their own bodies betrayed their lust. Vlad gently pulled my hands away from my naked breasts. I did not feel ashamed, but thrilled. The two men fighting not to look upon my nakedness faltered. One of them stumbled toward me. He was knocked back by the meaty fist of one of Vlad’s guards.

“Is this what you want? A vampire whore? A bride of the devil? You are betrayed by your own lusts!” Vlad laughed at them, mocking them. He pulled my long locks over my shoulders to hide my flesh.

I released them from my power. They stumbled back, terrified by how close their lust had drawn them to death.

“One may go to warn the others what foolish actions shall bring about. Two die as an example,” Vlad said casually.

“I must go back,” the priest exclaimed.

Vlad moved swiftly. Snatching up one of the long, sharp stakes, he rammed it up through the thick man’s body until it exploded out of his skull.

I turned away, sickened as brain matter splattered me. I heard the second man

cry out as I was showered with droplets of blood.

“Go! Never return! I have spared you,” Vlad shouted.

The remaining villager ran from the castle screaming. The wolves rushed after him nipping at his heels, spurring him on faster.

“Do not kill him! Frighten him, but do not spill his blood! For his obedience in delivering my message, he will have my protection,” Vlad declared stalking about the courtyard with triumphant fervor.

His two victims were hanging on their stakes: one dead, the other dying. I could not bear to look at them. This form of death seemed too horrible to witness for it was the death my father had also suffered.

My blood fever was gone. The rush of power faded. I covered my breasts with my hands in shame.

What had overcome me?

Vlad was flushed with power. His eyes glowed brightly. He was truly magnificent when he indulged in his own evil. He grabbed Ariana and began to ravish her right there, surrounded by the carnage and his own guards. Elina sulked away into the shadows as Cneajna faded away dejectedly.

I moved away slowly feeling quite tired. I knew the day was approaching, but some of my lethargy was from the emotional trauma of the night. Deep despair, heights of euphoria, flashes of anger, had all drained me.

“Glynis,” Vlad called out to me.

I turned to see him watching me as Ariana covered his chest with kisses.

“You see, we are the same. Seducers and killers of mortals.”

I closed my eyes tightly so I would not see the bodies of the men we had killed being dragged away by the servants.

“No, Vlad, we are not.”

Ariana giggled as she tugged at Vlad’s clothing. His eyes were dark and cunning as he gazed upon me. It was all too obscene to absorb. Blood and gore were splattered everywhere and the two of them were virtually ripping each other apart in a sexual frenzy while Vlad tried to converse with me.

“You shall see the truth, Glynis. I promise you, you will see the truth.”

I left them to their passion and sought refuge in the chapel tombs below the castle.

And here I sit, waiting for the dawn, writing down all that has occurred.

I have decided that I have no choice.

I will fight the hunger.

I will not be what Vlad is.

I must defeat him and the hunger.

I must.

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

The Castle

13th of September, 1819

Am I doomed to fail in my resolve? This night has been torture from beginning to end.

As always, my torment began with Prince Vlad.

As soon as we awakened, he was upon me. I was in no mood to have him accost me. As soon as he drew me close for a kiss, I smashed him with a candlestick and fled the chapel as he recoiled.

I did my best to outrun him. I evaded him quite well as we rushed through the castle. His laughter brought me to seething rage as he pursued me. At times he would grab hold of me, twirl me about, then vanish. His nails, long and sharp, tore at me. I slashed back at him, hissing savagely.

Furious, I realized he was merely toying with me.

I finally ran into the Brides' chamber, the heavy door swinging back and striking the wall with a resounding crash. It bounced back, almost closing, then was shoved open again.

I whirled about to face him. I was covered in blood by now, my own of course, the cruel tears in my flesh already mending. My lovely dress was torn and nearly falling from my body. Most certainly, I was quite a ridiculous sight to behold.

Vlad stood in the doorway, his brow furrowed, his eyes burning with green fire. I was satisfied to see the angry scratches I had inflicted trailing across his features.

"Come here!"

"I am not your slave! I am not your whore! I will not do as you say! I am not here to service you!"

"But you are!" Vlad moved swiftly into the room, a smirk twisting his full lips. "The sole purpose of your life now is to serve me."

I backed away, holding my hands out to him. "Come no closer! I will not be treated in this manner!"

From the corner of my eye, I saw Ariana seated upon her divan. She watched us, fascinated.

"You do not dictate to me how I treat my own wife!"

"I am not your wife!"

I avoided Vlad's first swipe of his hand, but the second landed me full in the face. I impacted with a thud on the floor. Kicking furiously, I pummeled his legs with my feet trying to topple him over.

I glanced at Ariana to see her studying her doll. The face was cracked and one of the eyes seemed on the verge of falling out. Did she not care for what was being done to me?

Another blow to my face brought my attention back to Vlad.

“I hate you!”

With a look of absolute joy and dreadful lust, he pinned me to the floor.

“Hate is such a passionate word, my dearest Glynis.” He griped a handful of my hair and pulled my face close to his. “That you hold such passion for me ignites my desire for you.”

“I hate you!”

He smiled with satisfaction. “I know.”

When he entered my body, I screamed in his face with rage. Then I was squirming and fighting beneath him.

“Help me,” I cried out to my sisters in desperation. Of course, there was no response. In the midst of my degradation, my gaze sought them out. I saw that Ariana had joined Cneajna on her bed. Cneajna was busily trying to embroider. Her lips were pursed while her gaze was fastened with great determination upon her work. It was as if my rape was not occurring before their eyes.

“Get off of me!” I slapped Vlad, and he, of course, slapped me back.

Elina entered the room and slowly walked over to where we struggled.

“Help me,” I pleaded with her.

She merely stood over Vlad, watching him thrust into me, her arms crossed across her chest.

Vlad finally finished and sat up.

I thrust out my foot and kicked him in the stomach. He simply backhanded me in response. With princely grace, he stood, adjusted his clothing, and swung his deep auburn hair back from his face.

“I hate you,” I spat at him.

“So you said.” He took particular care to adjust his cuffs, then glanced at Elina.

“Master, if you are done, I have the most urgent news for you.”

“What is it, Elina?”

“There is a carriage approaching the castle.”

Vlad chuckled with delight and whirled about. His long hair swung heavily around him, then settled against his waist. Clutching Elina to him, he swept his gaze over us. “Unannounced guests, my wives! We feast tonight!”

Ariana leapt up from Cneajna’s bed, clapped her hands with delight, before rushing to Vlad to embrace him tightly. He gave her a long, piercing kiss. Laughing, he released her and kissed Elina.

“A feast, my dark one. A feast of blood, rich and dark, to feed your hunger, to feed your beauty,” Vlad said seductively into Elina’s ear.

Ariana joyously danced around them, her long curls swinging around her.

Cneajna stood silently, her eyes gazing at me. I struggled to my knees, cursing Vlad in my thoughts. Vlad moved to her and grabbed hold of her face between his long hands.

“Are you not pleased, my dear first wife? Tonight we feast!”

Cneajna gazed into his brilliant green eyes, smiling. “Oh, of course, my dear husband! Of course I am pleased!” She pressed herself against him, kissing his lips passionately.

“Good! Dress finely. I want our guests to be impressed by your great beauty!” He glanced toward me as I still struggled to overcome the pain of his intercourse and stand. “Get her up and dress her as well. The miserable girl must feed as well. She must remember what it is to be a vampire.” He strode over to me and knocked me onto my back. “Will you not, dear Glynis?”

“I will not feed,” I hissed back.

“What did you say? You will not feed? Are you still refusing to answer the hunger? How many days has it been since you last fed? You can barely heal yourself you are so weakened.”

I averted my eyes. “A week.”

“Ah, the child! Did you not feed from the hunter...ah...five days ago? Or the lovely young woman I found lost in the forest three days ago?”

“She fed from neither,” Elina said with disgust. “She refused and ran off to hide in the dungeon. More for us, I told her.”

Vlad growled at me. “Why are you so tediously stubborn about this, Glynis?”

The week had been a horrible struggle. To not feed has been desperately hard, but I remained determined.

“Yes, why are you so stubborn?” Elina asked snidely. “Do enlighten us.”

I looked up, raised my chin, and said in a fierce voice, “I despise you! I hate you! I will never be what you are!”

Vlad began to laugh, obviously very amused by my words. “You are so painfully pathetic, Glynis. You are what I am and there is no denying it no matter how much you hide behind your English arrogance. You are a vampire. You are a killer.”

Gritting my teeth, I rolled over and pushed myself to my knees. “I will not feed. I would rather die than please you.”

Vlad chuckled with delight. “Oh, you will feed. You will. Now, I must prepare for our guests.”

With that, he simply vanished from the room.

Ariana spun about in her wild dance, singing to herself. Elina just smirked and strode away. Cneajna came to help me rise to my feet.

“You will feed,” Cneajna said softly. “You will. There is no other choice.”

And as I write this I fear her words are true and I am damned. But I shall remain here in our empty chambers and refuse to feed. For I will not be the monster Vlad wishes me to be. I cannot give into the hunger. I just cannot.

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

The Castle
Same night-

Can I confess to what has happened? Yes, I must. I must. I must write down all that is happening to me. I must retain my humanity despite this dreadful place. Let this be my confession, for I have sinned, and I fear there is no absolution.

Soon after my defilement, Vlad left me to change from my tattered dress into something more appropriate. I had been ordered to join my sisters in waiting for his summons. Instead, I crawled up onto the ledge of one of the windows overlooking the courtyard and perched there to watch the events unfold below.

Vlad greeted the guests warmly, invited them in, and entertained them in the great hall. Cneajna dressed in a beautiful gown, obviously the proud possession of one of Vlad's former victims, and had accompanied Vlad as his wife. Elina and Ariana had been beside themselves, their excitement ghoulishly joyful. They had left to wander the shadows soon after the guests had settled in to their last supper.

I remained behind, perched in the window, afraid if I bore witness to the slaughter, the hunger would overcome me. I watched as the gypsy men led the horses to the stables and the gypsy women dragged the heavy traveling cases of Vlad's victims into the castle. I knew the trunks were not for Vlad's guests, but for the Brides to pick over once the guests were dead and gone.

So I waited.

Strangely, I had been dangerously close to accepting this world and all it offered. I have to admit I enjoyed feasting on the gypsy girl. I could feel the sheer glory of the power of the blood within me. I had reveled in it.

It was only when Vlad brought us the child that I realized I could go no further into this darkness. It was that night I decided that I would fight the hunger until the madness descended and forced Vlad to destroy me. I did not know if my soul would find peace in heaven or torment in hell, but I did not care. I had to escape. I had promised my Mother, and death, though not quite what she had planned for me, was an escape.

All these thoughts flitted through my mind as I curled up in the window and stared over the mountains. I could feel the hunger gnawing at my bones, ripping at my mind, demanding to be quenched. The weakness in my body was almost pleasurable. It spoke of defeat of the vampire within me.

Then...

A horrendous scream rent the night air.

I gasped, shivered, and dug my fingers into my palms.

The slaughter had begun.

Then...

Another scream.

Vlad's roar of pleasure.

The sly laughter of my vampire sisters.
Terrified shrieks.

I clawed at my hair with my fingers: my stomach quivering, clenching, and demanding. I flung myself from the window onto the floor.

“No! No! I cannot listen!”

I lay in a heap shaking violently. The hunger descended upon me with all its fury, ripping at me, biting at me, demanding, needing. I curled into a tight little ball, my hair covering my face in long, red curls. Hands over my ears, I struggled not to hear the death cries echoing through the halls of the castle. The hunger built up within me, spreading into my limbs, becoming a fire of dark desire licking at me. The all-consuming desire to feed was upon me.

“No...no...” I whispered into my hair and pounded the floor with one fist.
“No!”

The poor travelers at Vlad’s mercy were just like my family. Innocent, stupid mortals who had no earthly reason to believe they would be feasted on by vampires if they stopped for the night at an old castle. I wept for them, for I understood their naivete, and I mourned their deaths. But I would not feed! I would not feed on the innocent!

But strange, intoxicating music was wafting through the room, foreign and exotic, pulling on me as much as the hunger did. I had never heard such music before. It was seductive, yet harsh to my ears.

Crying out, I fought the hunger even as I felt my body seizing as it responded to the bizarre combination of the music and my blood lust.

Softly murmuring voices floated about me as the sweet smell of blood filled my nostrils. Struggling against the intoxicating lure of the feast below, I writhed on the floor. I moaned as the fire in my limbs consumed me. As though I had no will over my own body, I rose slowly to my knees. Leaning forward, pressing my forehead against the cold stones of the floor, I tried to block out the exotic music, the sweet, coppery tangy fragrance of blood, and the uncontrollable hunger assailing my senses.

“Please, I cannot. I cannot, please...” I murmured.

The hunger burned through my body. I could feel my fangs, long and sharp, against my lips, and I yearned to feel them slipping into the soft, smooth flesh of a mortal.

The whispering voices seemed to flow about me, calling my name in hushed tones. I could feel the call to feed. I felt the great need to soothe my torment. To release myself to the pleasure of the feast.

I threw back my head, my hair falling about me like a great red curtain, and cried out. My eyes felt hot and burned with tears as my body trembled with the passion for blood.

I was losing myself to the hunger.

The music seduced my body. I felt myself twisting to the exotic drums as I

closed my eyes and let it consume my will. The voices swirled about me, whispering in maddening voices of the feast below. The sweet smell of blood seemed to fill my every breath.

Throwing back my head and arms, my body rose slowly upwards. The air lifted me up, caressed me, and enticed me as it carried me from the chamber. Through half-closed eyes, I could see the torches brightly burning in the corridor. I released myself to the power, feeling languid and weightless, as I was carried by the air to the feast. My dress fluttered around me as I was pulled downward, past darkened doorways and crumbling walls.

The music was growing more passionate as I floated in dizzying swoops and turns to the feast that awaited me. My hands grazed the walls and floors as my body twisted through the castle. I licked my fangs in anticipation as the sweet smells from below enticed me.

The Brides' voices reached me, their joyous laughter and singing echoing through the corridors. I opened my eyes slowly from my swoon as I passed through the doorway into the ancient banquet hall. Here the music was loud and crazed, the laughter harsh, and the smell of blood overpowering.

"And now you join us," Vlad said, laughing.

I floated to the center of the room and slowly rotated there. Through the veil of my hair I could see the bodies surrounding me, impaled on long, thick stakes. Some of the travelers were already dead and others were in the midst of their tortured death throes. Blood flowed freely from their horrendous wounds, a lake of thick, fresh blood forming on the floor before Vlad's throne.

Cneajna, Ariana and Elina were dancing about in a circle, their gowns flowing out about them. There were dipping their hands into the blood and licking it from their fingers or letting the dark, red blood drizzle into their open mouths. Elina laughed evilly as she thrust her hands into the gaping wound of a still living man. Cupping the fresh blood in her palms, she lifted them over her head and let the dark vampire wine dribble over her face.

I was quivering as my mind tried to cope with the horror and gore I saw around me. The desire to feed overwhelmed me. I pressed my hands against my eyes.

"You must feed," Cneajna whispered in my ear.

I felt Cneajna pluck me from the air and cradle me in her arms as she would a child. Slowly, she knelt before Vlad in the pool of blood, drawing me down with her, soiling our dresses.

"You must feed," she said firmly. "Or else the hunger will claim you and take you down into the madness. Then Vlad will kill you."

I slowly opened my eyes. I was quivering violently from the hunger. "I cannot be this."

Cneajna smiled at me, blood spilling from her lips. "But you are," she said, and kissed me.

She released me from her grasp as I knelt in the blood, feeling it soaking into the folds of my dress. Vlad stood above me, blood staining his thick lips. He held a goblet in one hand. As I watched, he thrust it under the ragged wound of one of his victims and the blood filled it. Smiling, his fangs glistening, he held it out to me.

“You are my bride. Drink.”

At his words, I sobbed hysterically. The hunger was consuming my very soul or whatever was left of it. I threw myself back against Cneajna’s body and she held me tightly, rocking me back and forth.

“I cannot. Please help me,” I whispered.

Cneajna cupped on long hand and dipped it into the river of blood where we knelt. “You must feed, my dear sweet Glynis. Drink for me.” She held her hand to my lips.

The intoxicating fragrance filled my senses as I relented to the hunger and drank. Instantly, I felt the warmth spreading through me as the blood satiated the hunger. I drank all that was presented to me and licked it from my lips.

“More,” I sighed.

Cneajna laughed and dipped her hand down into the blood. Ariana knelt before us and she also dipped her hands into the blood. I drank from her hand then Cneajna’s until the desire became so strong, I stumbled forward on my knees, raising my hands out to Vlad.

He smugly regarded me. “You are one of us.”

“Yes, my Master,” I whispered, embracing my fate.

Vlad smiled and slid the goblet into my hands. I feverishly swallowed all that was within.

The vampires gathered around me, my sisters supporting me as Vlad dipped the goblet over and over again. Finally, glutted, I fell into Vlad’s arms. His kiss was slow and passionate, his mouth tasting of blood and life. I relented to his seduction and closed my eyes, only tasting blood and power. Slowly, he lowered me into the blood and it flowed around me in dark, red waves. My sisters began to dance as Vlad rose to his feet.

I lay on the floor, feeling the blood within me spreading life throughout my body. The power was so tangible; I felt it coursing through my veins as it renewed my vampire heritage. The wounds Vlad had inflicted upon me faded away as my vision and hearing sharpened. My heart began to beat within my chest.

As the hunger receded into a memory, my conscience returned. The ecstasy of the feeding faded and, like a curtain rising, I fully realized what I had done. I had feasted on the innocents in the arms of my captor and tormentor, going against all I had sworn I would not do. I had become what Vlad had promised I would become: a monster that would feast on the innocents.

Trembling, I slowly rose to my feet. I was drenched in blood. It covered my

being, warm and slick against my cold vampire flesh. I found myself staring at a dead woman, her face slack, her eyes dead and empty of life. Her head was lolled to one side, the stake protruding from between her breasts. I turned away in disgust and gazed into the horror-filled eyes of a dying young man no older than twenty.

Repulsed, I backed away and nearly slipped. The dead and dying surrounded me as my new family danced to the strange music. It was then I realized the music was not music at all, but the fading heartbeats of the dying, their tortured moans, and the magnified symphony of the sounds of the night.

Vlad caught me and whirled me about. His long tongue licked the blood from my face and laughed at my wide-eyed expression. "This is who we are!"

I looked about to see Ariana holding hands with Elina, slipping about in the blood as they twirled, laughing and shouting joyfully. Cneajna came up behind Vlad and began to lick the blood from his hair, her eyes sly and seductive. Vlad released me to kiss his first wife.

The horror of it all overwhelmed me as I sank to my knees, my hands covering my face. I screamed until I thought I would go mad. The sounds of those wavering, tormented heartbeats tormented me, and I shivered at the sound.

To feed was one thing, but this...this was torture. This was madness. The moans of the dying made me weep and I could not stand it any longer. Rising swiftly to my feet, I drew Vlad's dagger from its sheath he had secured to his belt, and dashed away before he could grab me.

I raced to the young man with the desperate, horrified eyes and raised the dagger over my head. He looked terrified, then seemed to understand deliverance was at hand. I slammed the dagger into his heart, burying it to the hilt, splattering his lifeblood over my face. I felt him shudder and he was gone.

"What are you doing?" Vlad demanded.

I whirled about and ran past Elina to a woman spasming on her stake. Her death seemed close and certain, but I could not take the rattling in her throat. I drew the blade harsh and quick against her neck, ending her.

"I may feed, I may be a vampire, but I am not torturer!"

I sidestepped Ariana as she tried to lay hold of me, my vampire reflexes quick and sharpened by the blood that filled me. I leapt easily past Elina's grasping hands and buried the knife into the chest of an old man.

I could have sworn he uttered, "Thank you," with his last breath.

Elina grabbed hold of me and tried to draw me back. I felt the knife slide free of the old man's stilled heart, and I moved to plunge it into my assailant.

"Let her be!" Vlad ordered.

Elina shoved me away and turned her angry eyes toward him.

One heart remained, sluggish and faint. I walked over to a man, face down on the floor, his back nothing more than torn flesh and bone. By his clothes, I knew he was the driver, a lowly man in Vlad's eyes not worthy of the stake. I knelt

and turned him over. I was glad to see he was oblivious of this world for his pain had borne him away into the world of unconsciousness. With one single stroke, I stilled his heart and released him.

Rising, I turned my defiant countenance toward Vlad. Ariana and Cneajna stood on either side of him, their expressions a mixture of confusion and anger. Vlad merely looked at me with unreadable scrutiny.

Slowly, I raised the dagger and drew it across the tip of my tongue, cleaning the blade. Once it was no longer bloodied, I walked toward Vlad, my chin held high, the dagger clutched tightly in my hand.

Without a word, he reached out and I laid the blade in his hand. His long fingers closed over the hilt and he secured it back in its sheath. The gaze of his green eyes did not waver from my face.

“You have killed.”

“Yes, but I was merciful.” I was strangely unshaken by the murders I had just committed. My body was alive with the power of the blood I had consumed. I could feel my power radiating outward from me. I was not afraid, but resolved.

Vlad laughed softly. “Is there room for mercy here, dear Glynis?”

“Yes, I believe so. I have done as you wanted. I fed and I killed. What more would you want of me?”

Vlad regarded me thoughtfully, then reached out to rest his hand heavily against my neck. Drawing me close, he pressed his lips firmly to mine. He then whispered against them, “This time, I shall not punish you, for your words are true. You have only done what I desired.”

Licking my lips, I tasted blood. I looked up at him through my lashes. “I will no longer fight the hunger.”

“But you will be merciful?”

“When it suits me,” I answered truthfully.

Vlad smiled, his lips revealing his sharp teeth. “You amuse me, dear wife.”

“Then your life will not be boring with me in it,” I answered.

He flung back his head, laughed, and released me. “We shall talk soon, wife. We shall talk soon, but tonight, I shall indulge myself.” He buried his face in Ariana’s neck and drew her tight against him. She cooed and wrapped her limbs around him.

I turned from them, released from my torment, despite the carnage that lay about me. I would surrender to the hunger, but I would find my own way. And I would be stronger for it.

Slick with blood, but strong in spirit, I walked from the throne room, transformed, released and determined.

Now I sit alone, writing, and knowing fully that my resolve to escape, to fulfill my promise to my mother, will be fruitful. I saw in Vlad’s eyes tonight a glimmer of respect. I realize he is now enamored with my strength and cunning.

If I am wise, if I am clever, I may be able to use this to free myself.

Though I have given into the beast that is the hunger, I am not afraid. I am still Lady Glynis Wright.

Chapter 15

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright-The Castle
12th of October, 1819

I have not written in my diary for so long. I have tried to set pen to paper on several occasions, but could not bear to record the drudgery that has become my existence. Since the night of our feast, I have played a dangerous game with Vlad. I acquiesce to his demands in order to bide my time. I know that I am growing stronger as time goes on, and if he believes me to be obedient, he is more likely to allow us to feed and not go hungry.

At first I felt very clever in my plans to lure him into believing that I am resigned to be his Bride, but of late I have begun to chaff at the restrictions on my life. I have grown increasingly defiant. I was beginning to doubt my plans, but now I see I must curb my natural desire to war against Vlad.

Tonight, a new moon hid its face from the night and darkness dwelt heavily over the land. As soon as I awakened I was in a pensive mood. A heaviness in my heart came with awareness. Dread permeated my every thought. When I slipped from my coffin, I stood in morose silence, seeking to find the will to venture out into the night. I had grown so weary of this new life with its constraints and I yearned for England and my family.

At last, I followed the sounds of my vampire sisters chasing each other through the castle. Their gaiety was repugnant to me, but I found myself at a loss as to what to do to get me through the barren night.

I followed the sound of the vampire women laughing and ended up wandering out into the night. Within the tangled web of the gardens of the castle, Dracula's Brides played with no regard to the lack of moonlight.

Laughing with delight, Cneajna prowled through the darkness, peering under decaying benches and pressing the dead foliage aside with her hands. Her eyes glimmered with red fire as I watched her seek out my sisters.

I drew near a fountain and stared into the night sky. I was in no mood to indulge myself in their games. Ariana moved past me, crawling along the floor like a strange insect on her fingertips and toes. I looked away from her disturbing form into the dank, still waters of the fountain. A faint reflection gazed up at me from the murky water, and I sighed sadly.

There was wild laughter when Cneajna uncovered Elina hiding behind a tree and there was a mad dash through the dead garden. I watched them as their long hair and skirts flowed around them as they rushed deeper into the gloom and

further away.

I was glad for it.

I returned my gaze to the night sky. I watched for any sign of the stars to give me comfort. All that greeted my gaze were thick, heavy clouds that loomed over me like a crushing hand. Then, out of that dismal sky, fell a small speck of silvery ice. I watched in silent reverie as the first snowflake fell to earth. Then another followed, dancing on the night breeze, twisting as it fell. I stepped into its path and felt its cold little kiss on my cheek.

Then the sky opened and the snow fell, sweetly, softly, to hide away the dead plants of the garden and fill the night with glowing brightness.

Vlad found me in the garden, enraptured by the beauty of the snowfall. My gaze was turned upwards as I watched the dance of the snowflakes.

“Glynis,” he said softly from the doorway.

I turned to him, my gaze narrowing. I knew I was visibly upset with his interruption of my small moment of peace.

“Yes?”

“A word with you,” he said, beckoning to me with one hand. His green eyes were thoughtful as he gazed upon me.

I sighed, stepping toward him. There was a soft crunch beneath my slipper and I looked down to see the ground was already covered in a fine layer of powder.

“Come along, Glynis. I have some business that must be attended to and I need your assistance.” He looked past me and motioned with his hand.

I glanced over my shoulder to see the three Brides emerging from the snow, their gowns seeming to dissolve into the swirling flakes.

“Ariana and Elina, I need both of you to leave the castle. There is a man staying at the inn in the village. He is waiting for you. I will soon have a parcel ready for you to take to him. Dress as Gypsy women, then wait for my summons.”

“As you desire, Master,” Ariana said, sliding past him with a flirtatious smile.

Elina followed her, casting a curious glance in my direction.

Cneajna strolled up to us, regarding Vlad curiously. “You look pensive, my husband. What concerns you so?”

“You need not worry, Cneajna,” Vlad responded in a distracted tone, his fingers lightly stroking his beard as he gazed intently at me.

I could see the apprehension in Cneajna’s blue eyes. Her lush red mouth pursed pensively, and I felt a pang of sorrow for her. There was something about her gaze. It was so beautiful, so potent, so lonely, and I knew nothing I did or said to her would make it fade from her lovely features.

“Glynis, come...now.” Vlad said, holding out his hand to me. “We must go to my library.”

Reluctantly, I moved to his side, my jewelry tinkling softly.

We left Cneajna, alone, in the snow, staring after us with a winsome, yet worried expression on her face. Oftentimes, I felt that Vlad disregarded how much she truly loved and pined for him. But he is a brute, so why should I be surprised that he would deny her very real love for him?

I obediently followed him through the long hallways and steep staircases to the library he often took refuge in. A fire was lit in the fireplace and the room seemed almost cheery. Papers were spread out on a table and Vlad motioned to a chair. I took my seat as he slid into his. His brow furrowed as his hands lightly touched several of the documents as I waited in silence.

Finally, he said in a low voice, "I have been planning to move to England for some time now. I spoke the truth to your parents about my desire to leave my home here and establish myself in London." His green eyes slowly raised to stare into mine. "I wish to buy an estate in England and move there to live as an aristocrat and a gentleman."

I tried not laugh at his usage of the word gentleman.

He continued, "Last year I told Sir Stephen my plans to move to England and that I needed to wed an Englishwoman. An aristocrat. When he heard that your family was visiting Rome, he wrote to your father and invited your family to Buda. Then he contacted me."

I felt my mouth fall open as I realized the extent of Sir Stephen's betrayal of my family. I had thought he had merely obeyed Vlad by sending us to him. It was horrific that he had actually lured us to Buda and into a trap.

"Do you remember that night you attended the opera?"

I nodded, remembering the night vividly. It had been a few days after our arrival in Buda. I had dressed in an elegant ivory gown my mother had purchased for me in Paris. Despite the finery I wore and the jewels that had adorned my throat and wrists, I had felt rather put out. In fact, I had felt ill the entire night and had hidden in the back of the box, ignoring the performance on the stage.

"That is when I first saw you. I sat in the box across from your family and watched the shadows caress your beautiful face. It was then I knew I wanted you to be my mortal Bride. I was inspired by your beauty." Vlad's gaze swept over my face and he smiled with satisfaction. "I made additional inquiries about your family to Sir Stephen. He was very informative about your family and their dealings."

I was surprised at his compliment to my beauty, but annoyed by his confession of Sir Stephen's betrayal of my family. "He's such a little sniveling toad."

Vlad laughed slightly. "Yes, he is, but a very loyal subject. I called on Sir Stephen and told him that I desired you. But I could no longer remain in Buda. The vampire hunters were stalking me, and my home in Buda was under suspicion. That is when Sir Stephen sent you to me."

I lowered my eyes and swallowed hard. It was painful to hear how this monster had lured my family all this way, had us journey so long, only to murder them and destroy me. All because he thought me beautiful, and I suited his plans.

“It was a mistake to bring your family here. I had forgotten how pompous and self-righteous the British are. The death of your family was never my intention.”

The look I bestowed him with was filled with my fury, but he ignored it, “I am so sorry their deaths inconvenienced you,” I said sharply.

He frowned at me. “If your father had accepted my proposal of marriage, they would all be alive today. All he had to do was accept and leave you here as my wife. Later, you would have accompanied me back to England after they prepared for our arrival.”

“How smug of you to believe I would have agreed to any of this! That I would be your happy, besotted wife and do as you said!” I could not help myself. He was just so sure that his original plan would have worked if only my father had not stood up to him!

“You would have learned to love me. All mortal women love men with power.”

“Never! I never would have loved you. I despised you from the beginning,” I said rather shortly.

Vlad just smiled, gesturing with the sweep of his hand. “It does not matter now. Those plans are dead to us as is your family.”

I hissed softly, and though he looked bemused, his eyes narrowed.

“You have been in my household for several months now. You are learning to love your new sisters and to accept what you are. Now you must prove your loyalty to me.”

“I hate you,” I responded.

Vlad reached out and gently stroked my cheek then took a firm hold of the back of my neck and drew me to him. “I know you hate me, but loyalty to one does not also mean that you must love the one you serve.”

I wrinkled my nose at him, and said, “I do not serve you. I am your prisoner.”

Vlad turned his head slightly, his green eyes never straying from my face. It was as if he considered his words before speaking them. He abruptly released me, sitting back in his chair. “Your brother has written my solicitor in Buda.”

I started in my chair and for a moment I was overwhelmed with fear. The visage of my beloved brother swam before my eyes. I felt tears, hot and fierce well in my eyes.

“He actually wrote to your parents first. When there was no response, he wrote to Sir Stephen inquiring as to the whereabouts of your family. He is my solicitor in Buda. Did you know that?”

My eyes narrowed. “No, I did not. I thought him merely your lapdog.”

Vlad lightly ran his fingertips along the edge of a goblet sitting on the table. I could smell the blood within. "I spoke the truth when I told you that I planned to marry you and move to England." His eyes darkened and his voice deepened as he said, "But your father defied me and those plans were lost to me. Or so I thought."

"You made me a vampire. I cannot be your devoted mortal wife any longer."

"That is true, but that does not necessarily mean I should abandon my plans. Sir Stephen was under strict orders to not allow anyone to know your destination. Your brother's letter mentions me by name. Obviously, he failed."

"May I eat Sir Stephen?" I asked with a sweet smile.

Vlad flicked his gaze toward me and gave me a slight smile. "No. I did not know of your brother back in England. This changes everything." Vlad slid a letter across the table to me. "Your brother is concerned. He is worried for you and for your family. You must write him and tell him that the shadow of misfortune has fallen across your family."

"You want me to tell him what you have done to us!" I gaped at him in surprise.

Vlad merely chuckled, shaking his head. "No, no, no, my impetuous one. I want you to write to your brother and tell him that as your family journeyed here a storm overtook your carriage and it was swept off the pass and into the river. Only you survived and were rescued by my people. They brought you back to my castle and I am nursing you back to health."

I snorted in disgust at his tale. "You are such a bastard! You are not a hero of some false drama! I will not lie to my brother!"

"But you must. You shall continue to write to him and tell him of my great compassion for your well being. You will tell him that I am caring for you and that you are beginning to love me."

I curled my fingers into tight little fists. "Never!"

"In time you will write to inform him that you have married me and that we are quite happy together."

"Never!" I rose angrily to my feet, tears streaming down my face. "What duplicity is this you ask of me? I cannot do that. I will not be party to your deceit!"

Vlad rose up before me, dark, menacing, and cruel. "Yes, you will. You will do as I say, my dear Glynis."

"I will not help you go to England and destroy what remains of my family!" I turned away from him, sobbing, furious, my body shaking with my emotions.

Vlad's fingers dug into my hair and he dragged me against his body. He drew my face near to his and whispered in my ear, "Do not defy me."

"Kill me! Kill me and write to my brother that we all perished!"

"Kill you? I will not kill you, Glynis. I will punish you as only I can punish you. I will make you suffer and beg for a death that will not come. If you do not

obey me, I will torture you with a living death I have only granted one other. I loved her as I love you, but she betrayed me and I had to banish her from my home,” Vlad whispered in a low, terrifying voice.

“You do not love, you do not love,” I hissed at him. The veil of my tears warped his face as I tried to draw away from him, but he held me firmly against him.

“I do love. In my way, I do love. Even when I strike you down, I love you. I love your pain. I love your misery. I love your tears. I love your blood. I love your cries of torment as much as I love your moans of pleasure. And if you force me, I will love you even as I grant you a living death that will be your hell on this earth.”

“I will not obey! I will not give you my brother! I love him and he is all that I have left in this world!”

“I do not want his blood. I want his help. That is all.”

I shook my head in protest.

“You do not believe my threat?” Vlad stepped back, his fingers tangled in my hair, and thrust his hand downward, forcing me to my knees. Drawing back my head, he leaned over me and said. “Since you do not believe me, then I shall show you.” He flung me away, and I fell to the floor.

Panic ripped at me as I gazed up at him through the cascade of my hair. The tone in his voice was an echo of the night he had killed my family. What more could he do to me? I was certain I did not want to know.

He moved to stand over me with mirth and anger mixed in his eyes. He let out a growl that made me clutch at the floor in dread.

Astoundingly, his face seemed to expand outward, his eyes sinking beneath his brow as his nose and mouth elongated. He ripped his clothes from his body to reveal hair flowing down over his arms and legs, muscle and bone rippling beneath his skin. The vampire threw back his twisted face and howled as I shrank away at the horror of his transformation. His body bucked and he fell to his hands, his long nails growing dark and sharp. I scuttled back from him in terror as his face fully transformed into that of a wolf. Shaking off the remnants of his dark clothing, the wolf moved toward me, the gold dragon medallion swaying about his thick neck.

“What is this? What has happened?”

The wolf was enormous. It was a beast of nightmares with its glowing red eyes and feral presence. It was pure, ominous power incarnate.

It was Vlad’s voice that uttered forth in a guttural growl. “Climb onto my back.”

Trembling, I cowered before the great beast. I wanted to refuse him, but I found myself reluctantly crawling on my hands and knees to him. He growled low in his throat, flashing his long sharp teeth, and I flinched in fear.

Reluctantly, I crawled onto the back of the huge creature and grabbed up

fistfuls of dark fur. I held on tightly as the wolf whirled about and carried me out of the library.

Clinging to the beast, I was carried down the corridors of the castle and out the great entrance into the night. As I huddled close to the back of the wolf, he ran swiftly over the ground, the world blurring. The wind tore at my hair and face as I pressed my cheek into the thick ruff of his neck. The journey was swift and surreal. I could hear the calls of other beasts of the night mingled with the breathing of the Vlad-wolf beneath me as my own tortured heart beat fearfully within my breast.

I raised my head briefly to see the snow-covered cypress trees rushing past me. The ground flowed swiftly beneath the huge paws of the wolf. Only the night sky remained still, the moon's face hidden beneath a cloak of a million stars, for at last, after the great snowfall, the clouds had scattered and the stars once more ruled the night.

The lupine beast leaped over a low wall and into a graveyard, jarring me and forcing me to grip at its fur desperately as my body almost tumbled to the ground.

A white marble sepulcher rose majestically over the pale tombstones and the wolf padded toward it. Just before the entrance to the tomb, the Vlad-wolf stopped.

“Get off,” he growled.

I slid off the wolf and stood among the true dead. My hair swirled around my waist as I took a step forward, the snow encompassing my feet and making me shiver. Hugging myself tightly, I started as a long howl rent the air. I whirled about just as Vlad Dracula rose up before me clad only in his long auburn hair and gold medallion.

He reached out and took my arm roughly in his long fingers. Leaning toward me, I was repulsed to see that his teeth were still long and wolf-like. “Come with me and see the death I can grant you.”

Dismally, I allowed myself to be lead to the tomb. My eyes wandered up to the writing above the doorway.

“This is were my Erzsébet rests. The Countess Dolingen. She was my most favored Bride. She was from Gratz in Styria. That is what is written above the door.”

“Sought and found death in 1801,” I read softly.

“Though it was not the death she desired. She refused to obey me and finally drove me to punish her.” Vlad pointed at a great iron stake that was driven through the top of the tomb. “Come. You must see inside.”

Vlad pushed open the ornate bronze door into the tomb and entered. I timidly followed him for I sensed a power here; a fading power enfolded in a great sadness.

Vlad waved one hand and torches lining the walls sprang to life and the

darkness fled to the corners of the marble tomb.

I could only gasp in horror.

Lying on a raised platform was a beautiful woman. The long iron stake came through the roof of the tomb and straight through the body of the woman and into stone beneath her. Her once fashionable red and gold dress was faded and worn. Pieces of the fine fabric skittered across the floor as I moved toward her. The smell of old dried blood permeated the air. I saw that a fresh body was curled up at the head of the platform.

She had an exquisitely sculptured face with high cheekbones and a vibrant red mouth. Her black hair was thick and glossy as it fell over the sides of her resting place to the floor. Thick, dark lashes threw shadows over her flushed cheeks and when I approached, that dark fringe sprang back to reveal eyes the color of amber.

“She’s alive!”

“Yes, my beloved Erzsébet,” Vlad answered. “She is alive.”

My hand reached out tentatively toward the stake, my fingers were quivering.

“My beloved wife, Erzsébet, I have come to see you,” Vlad said softly to the woman lying before us.

A harsh laughter filled the room as her lips parted to reveal long ivory fangs. “I wish not to see you, my damned husband.” The vampire moaned with pain and her hand reached out reflexively to grasp hold of the iron stake impaling her. I could see that any movement would cause her pain.

“I have brought my newest Bride. She is a lady from England. Lady Glynis Wright.”

Erzsébet’s gaze flicked toward me, then she laughed. “Another to drive mad?”

Vlad’s green eyes flashed red and his jaw set with anger. “She wishes for death to escape me as you once did. I brought her to show her the death I granted you.”

Her amber eyes looked toward me, and her sigh whispered into the shadows.

“Yes, another strong, beautiful woman for you to torture and defile. You live up to your name, husband.”

I reached out to her, my heart broken in the presence of her punishment. “Are you in great pain?”

The Countess of Dolingen began to laugh until she gasped in pain and her hands clung to the stake in agony.

“I am sorry! I am sorry! I did not mean to upset you,” I cried out, moving to comfort her.

Vlad flung me back from her and snarled, “Do not go near her! She is mad with the hunger. She will drain you dry!”

“Dracul! Dracul! I curse you! I curse you! May your plans never succeed. One day someone will slice off your head and impale it on a stake just as the

Turks planned. A pity they raised the head of an imposter over Constantinople. I pray to see the night your head is raised up over any city. I live in agony only to see your death!”

“And yet I love you despite your curses,” Vlad hissed at her, then leaned down to kiss her red lips, hard and fiercely. Her drew back quickly, before her sharp teeth could clamp down on his lips.

Again, she cried out in pain, her hands holding tight to the iron stake. “I curse you, Vlad.”

“You made me trap you here, Erzsébet! This is what you did. Not I! You defied me and now you feast on peasants who wander into this mausoleum for shelter.” Vlad was clearly in a rage now and he kicked the rotting corpse into a corner. Snatching a torch off the wall, he set it ablaze and stood over it, watching it burn.

I stood back away from both of them, unsure of what to do. It was clear that a great love had been lost and now all that remained was hatred and yearning. Vlad whirled back around and glared at me.

“Look at her! Look at her! Dead and yet living. When will another peasant wander in here some stormy night so she can feast on him? Is this the fate you want?”

Erzsébet sobbed in her anguish, “You are a monster!”

“I am Dracula!”

I could stand no more. It was all far too horrible. I stepped toward the impaled vampire and cried out in despair, “Erzsébet, I swear to you I will free you. I swear it!”

Erzsébet turned her amber eyes toward me and tears fell onto the cold marble beneath her. “If you escape him, keep running. Do not let him destroy you as he has destroyed me. Do not let him destroy you!”

Vlad’s form blurred and suddenly he was over her, his hand covering hers on the stake. Staring down into her eyes, he whispered in a voice filled with dark passion, “One night you will beg me to be set free.”

Erzsébet’s only response was her laughter.

Furious, Vlad grabbed my hand and thrust me forward, out of the tomb. The torches fell cold and darkness returned to the Countess of Dolingen’s world. Her laughter followed us, taunting Vlad as he slammed shut the bronze door.

“How could you do that to her,” I demanded.

Vlad grabbed me and pulled me roughly against him. His hands gripped my face tightly and he kissed me with dark, hungry desire. I trembled under the power of his kiss and hated him with a rage that felt like it would consume me. Yet, the passion of that moment enraptured me and despite myself, I swooned. Breaking his kiss, he leaned his forehead against mine.

“As I did this to her, I will do it to you. Do you understand?”

His fingers wound tightly into my hair and he pressed his face hard against

mine.

“Do you understand?” he asked.

“Yes,” I finally answered, my voice catching with fear.

“Will you write your brother?”

My gaze slid upwards to the great iron stake looming over the top of the sepulcher. I shuddered at the thought of such a fate. Slowly, I nodded.

“Tell me, Glynis. Will you write your brother?”

“Yes,” I said, and wept as he kissed me.

Chapter 16

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright-Continued

The Castle

Vlad returned to the castle wearing the form of a wolf. The moment my bare feet touched the icy stones of the courtyard, he bounded off, his anger as tangible as the cold night wind.

Gathering my skirts, I hurried toward the entrance of the castle. The great bronze door opened and Cneajna stood there, her long blond hair falling around a face so forlorn it made my heart ache. I immediately seized her hands in mine and kissed her cool cheek.

“What is it, Cneajna? Why do you look so heartbroken?”

“He took you to her, did he not?”

I nodded, trying not to think of the agonized screams and wild laughter of Erzsébet. “Yes, he did.”

Cneajna sighed, then shook her head as she drew her hands quickly away. Turning on her heel, she strode back into the castle, one hand pressed against her lips.

“Cneajna,” I called out, pursuing her. I reached out and touched the gentle curve of her shoulder.

She hesitated, then turned to face me.

“Please, do not leave me. I am troubled and afraid. What I have seen and heard tonight has me shaken. Please, let us take solace together. Let us bind together our strength to carry us through this wretched night.”

She gently smoothed my hair back from my face, then drew me against her. I flung myself into her embrace and clung to her. She whispered that if she had given birth to a daughter she might have looked like me. That her mortal husband had the thickest, most fiery locks she had ever seen until she had seen my hair. Her long fingers stroked my cheek and she kissed me lightly.

“What he did to Erzsébet, he said he will do to me if I do not obey him, Cneajna.”

“Now you know why I plead with you to obey our husband. Now do you

understand what he is capable of?”

I drew away from her and flung out my hands dramatically. “But it is monstrous what he has done! She is alive and in so much pain. I was so horrified and afraid of her fate, I betrayed my own brother to Prince Vlad!”

“I love Erzsébet. I love her more than I can say. She is the most beautiful of women and I adore her as I would my own sister. When she lived with us, she made life here more bearable...more civilized. Erzsébet wanted to be happy here, but Vlad did not allow her the freedoms she craved. Over the years, her love for him turned to hatred until at last, she tried to kill him. And he did what had to be done.”

“Why did he not just kill her? It would have been so much better than impaling her alive. To suffer that way for an eternity.”

“One night he will destroy her when his ambition grows greater than his love for her. To keep her alive is to endanger himself. But it is his way. Vlad has always impaled those who defied him, even when he was a mortal man. Erzsébet is a vampire and she cannot die from such a punishment unless the stake pierced her heart.” Cneajna’s expression became troubled as she turned away from me.

“I weep for her. I weep for her because she went mad and destroyed herself. And yet, I still love her.”

“He did it to her! Can you not see that? He drove her to hate him!” I paced back and forth, wringing my hands. “I can understand far too well how she must have felt. How he drove her into madness and she had no choice but to seek his death. He is a monster! A monster! And I have betrayed Andrew to him!” I fell back against a pillar and buried my face in my hands.

“What do you mean? Who is Andrew? Is he your brother? Does he live in England? And if so, in what way have you betrayed him?”

In a trembling voice, I told her all that had happened. Cneajna listened in silence; one hand gently grasping mine. When I finished my story, Cneajna kissed my forehead tenderly, stroking my hand lightly with her long, slim fingers.

“Do not fear, sweet Glynis. If our husband wishes for your brother to help him move to England, then he will certainly not kill him.”

“But he wanted my family to help him and he killed them,” I pointed out to her.

“For you, dear Glynis. For you! He wanted you desperately. When you first arrived, we followed in the shadows admiring you. We were all taken with your haughtiness and your beautiful red hair. Later, after you were asleep, Vlad came to me and told me how much he desired you. I could see it in his eyes that nothing would stop him from claiming you as his own. And now you are one of us.” She smiled with contentment. “Your father never should have defied our husband. That is what doomed them all. So you must not defy Vlad if you wish for your brother to live. You must do as our husband commands and your

brother's life will be spared. Vlad can be generous if he is obeyed and given the respect that is his due."

I sighed with exasperation, drawing away from her. "In this world, I cannot win. I am so utterly trapped by his power and his will."

"It is his world and we must obey him without question."

I could see Cneajna truly believed those words. But I cannot. Yes, it may be Vlad's world, but there has to be a way to break free. But to save Andrew, I have to capitulate. I realize that truth though I hate it. There truly is no other way.

"Cneajna, how can you stand it? Living in his power, submitting to his every wish and whim." The intensity in which I spoke those words demanded an answer.

Cneajna hesitated, then said softly, "It is better than my mortal life." She drew away from me, moving across the stone floor to the staircase. "Memories are strong on this night, calling to me, compelling me to speak to you, but not here. Come with me to our chambers. Let us rest there as Elina and Ariana deliver our Master's message to his servant in the village."

I hurried after her and soon we stood huddled together before the cold hearth in our chambers. For some reason, the cold on this night seemed to pierce through us with exceptional viciousness. Cneajna waved her hand over the blackened wood beckoning forth a fire that immediately sprang to life. Sinking to her knees, Cneajna stared deeply into the fire. Drawing a fine brocade coverlet from a nearby couch, I sat beside her, wrapping us in the warm fabric.

"Staring into the fire, I can feel the memories unfurling in my mind. I can almost see my mortal past," she whispered. "All tonight, the memories have been there, trying to speak, to make me remember. Remember why I came to be here and why I fear for you."

Curling up into her side and snuggling into the warmth of the coverlet, I whispered, "Please, tell me. Let me know who you are."

"I was happy in my mortal life until I married. My family was a fine aristocratic Hungarian family. My father was a great man and a loving father. My mother was beautiful and kind. I had two elder brothers who became great soldiers and strong leaders. Growing up, I loved them all and I was so very happy. Then I married István. He was a great warrior and had favor in the court of my mother's cousin, King Matyas of Hungary. My husband had fought under my cousin and it was Matyas who wished for me to marry István. At first I refused, but when I finally met him, I loved him.

"I thought István loved me and we would be happy forever. I truly believe that he did love me in the beginning, but when I failed to give birth to the heir he desired, his love faded."

Her voice trembled, and I reached out to take her hand to soothe her. She did not take her gaze from the fire, but fastened it even more firmly to the dancing flames.

“Years passed and I had no children. István eventually stopped coming to me and would instead lay with a young woman he had brought into our home. Her name was Piroska. At first, I did not mind her so very much.”

“I do not understand. How could you allow his mistress into your home?” I shook my head, shocked at the mere proposition of such a thing. I could barely comprehend how easily Vlad and the women embraced polygamy as the norm.

“It was my husband’s right to have a heir,” Cneajna said with a slight smile on her lips. “As the years passed, she gave birth not only to one son, but to three. I was still without child. Piroska began to torment me with her snide words. Then she began to usurp my position within the household. If my cousin had not been King of Hungary, I think István would have turned me out in favor of Piroska.”

“That is too horrible, dear Cneajna. You did not deserve that! He was an utter beast to you!” I threw my arms around her, hugging her tightly. She smiled at me, and I was relieved until I saw the tear trickling down her cheek that she did not even seem to notice.

“He would often ridicule me in her presence. He would say my beauty was wasted and that I should be as dry and shriveled as my womb.” Her eyes were riveted on the flames, watching as they writhed and danced before her. “Piroska would taunt me without mercy and belittle me before my servants. She took my chambers and I was forced to move into her small rooms. She took my gowns and jewels and rose up to control my household. I was frustrated and angry. I begged István to come to me, to give me a chance to have his child. At last, he did. To my delight, soon after, I was with child. I was so happy I could barely contain my excitement.” More tears fell and Cneajna’s face seemed almost human: vulnerable and soft. “Then, one day, Piroska came to me and demanded that I stay away from her child. The youngest, János, had become too fond of me and she was jealous. We argued and she pushed me. I fell to the floor and began to bleed. By nightfall, I had lost my child. My only child.” Her words faded as she ran her hand over her features and realized she was crying. Slowly, she wiped her tears on the coverlet, and sighed. “I was devastated, but István was disgusted with me. I tried to tell him that Piroska had pushed me, but he would not listen. He never touched me again.”

“Oh, Cneajna, how utterly awful for you. Could you not return to the home of your family?”

She shook her head. “No, no. My parents had long passed from the world and my brothers were busy fighting the Turks. I thought of going to Matyas and begging for sanctuary in his household, but, alas, I was too proud. So I suffered in my own home and watched another woman live the life I should have had.”

I began to understand the great emptiness in Cneajna’s eyes: her quiet desperation and pain. Her vampiric life was a pale reflection of the life she had craved as a mortal. A household of servants, a strong husband, and children...

but in this reality she had gypsies as servants, a vampire lord as a husband, and young vampire brides as children. It was an utter mockery of her heart's desire, but she could not see that.

"One day," she continued, "Piroska came to me and told me she was pregnant once more. She was mocking me, laughing at me, dressed in my clothes, wearing my jewels, carrying my husband's child. I could not stand the sight of her anymore. I had been eating my meal when she had entered and did not realize I still clutched a knife in my hand. I meant to slap her, but instead, I slashed her cheek. Her blood splashed me as she began to scream. I do not know how to explain what happened, but the sight of her blood and the sound of her screams only seemed to fuel my anger against her. I slashed her face again and she fell to the floor, and before I realized what I was doing, I brought the knife down over and over again until she was silent."

Her words chilled me and her expression frightened me. I could almost see her kneeling over her enemy, bringing the dagger down over and over again. I could vividly feel the intensity of her anger. I understood all too well the desperation to destroy the one who was destroying you. How many times had I fantasized of killing Vlad and shedding his blood?

Cneajna wiped a tear away, and said in a tremulous voice, "When my husband entered the room to find out why Piroska was screaming, he found me kneeling over her with the knife still in my hands. What horrified him most, he said later, was that I was licking the drops of her blood from my lips."

"She drove you to it," I declared. "She was so cruel to you. I do not know how you could have stood it! I would have been mad with anger."

Cneajna began to laugh, a bitter sound. "But can you not see, Glynis, I was mad. I was so insane with my jealousy and desperation I murdered Piroska and felt no remorse. My husband was horrified at what I had done, but he did not kill me as I expected. Instead, he took me to King Matyas. My cousin was not as mortified as my husband. As a king who had fought for his throne, he knew what it meant to desire something so desperately you would kill to achieve it. But I had to be punished. Matyas sent me to Visegrád, to his summer palace. I was to be kept there until I died. I was not to leave the palace grounds. It was not a true punishment. I loved it there. It was so beautiful and serene with its beautiful views and red marble fountains. It was heaven compared to the hell I had lived through. I would go down to the Danube River and sit there for hours in the sun."

"Were you happy?"

"I was at peace. Yet, not happy. That came later. One day, as I sat beside the Danube, another prisoner, a man I had only heard of in passing, sat down beside me on the riverbank. His name was Vlad Tepes, son of Dracul. He asked me why I was at the palace and why the servants would not speak of me when he asked them my name. I told him I was a murderess and he did not seem upset by

that confession.”

“Of course not,” I sniffed daintily.

Cneajna smiled at the memory. “No, he would not be. I told him what I had done and he said that Piroska deserved her death for usurping my authority and murdering my unborn child. He was the only person who ever fully understood why I had to kill Piroska. We spoke often during our captivity. I found him to be the most incredible man. He was determined to rule his own people in Wallachia and push back the Turk invaders. It was not long before I loved him and he loved me. I would have been his wife, but I was still married to István and Matyas would not allow it. Instead, Vlad married Ilona Szilagy, a cousin to both Matyas and myself. I understood why he had to do this. He wanted Matyas to help him regain his land and he needed to form a bond to the family. When he left, freed of his imprisonment, he swore to me he would one day return for me.”

“But why was he imprisoned?”

“When the Turks overran Wallachia, Vlad had fled to Hungary to appeal to my cousin for help. My cousin instead imprisoned him for his own reasons. That is why I met Vlad. I wrote long letters to Matyas, appealing to him, begging him to release Vlad and allow him to once more conquer Wallachia and save his people from the Turks. In the end, he must have listened, for Vlad was released and as I said, he married one of my relatives.”

I pondered her words. “So, Vlad was a great warrior for Wallachia.”

“A great warrior and a king. He built this castle during his reign and all the land that surrounds it was his to rule.”

No wonder he is so arrogant, I thought. “When did he return for you?”

Cneajna sighed. “I heard of his death at the hands of assassins sent by the Turks by letter from my cousin. Vlad had once more become ruler of Wallachia, and I knew he had achieved what he had desired most: to push back the Turks, kill his brother Radu, and reclaim his throne. I was devastated to read that his head was taken by the Turks to Constantinople and impaled on a stake over the city. I threw myself to the ground and was inconsolable. I wept for days until I could cry no more. I was so despondent; I would not eat or sleep. I would sit in my room and reread all the letters he had sent to me after he had been freed from Matyas' custody. He had been faithful in his correspondence and my heart would always beat faster when I saw his seal upon my letters. And then, one last letter, posted before his death, arrived. He wrote that I was always in his thoughts and that he wanted me to be with me until death and beyond for eternity. He said no woman he had known had understood his torment as I had. I was the only woman that knew what it was to taste the blood of one's enemy after vanquishing them. I cried bitter tears as I read the letter. I thought I would go mad with grief.”

“And then he came, did he not?”

“Yes. I fell asleep in my bedroom and dreamed only of death. Then, in the darkness of my despair, I woke to feel his lips against mine. I was thrilled to see

him, yet confused. I knew he was supposed to be dead, yet, he kissed my tears away and held me tightly against him. There was another in the room. A beautiful woman with raven hair and eyes like fire.”

“Erzsébet.”

“Yes, Erzsébet. She was powerful and I knew she was not mortal. Her eyes were like fire and when I looked into Vlad’s eyes, I saw the same fire. I was afraid, but he kissed me and whispered he had come to claim me as his own. When I felt his teeth pierce my neck, I knew he loved me.” She began to cry again as I wrapped my arms around her.

“Do not cry, Cneajna. Please, do not cry!”

“Do you not see, Glynis? He gave me back everything I had lost. The position as the first wife of his household, even over Erzsébet; she who was his first companion in his vampire life. He gave me everything I wanted: fine jewels, beautiful clothes and children. You and Ariana and Elina are my children. I love all of you. And more importantly, Vlad gave me eternal life, eternal beauty, and the eternal hope that someday, we shall rise up and rule as we once did.”

I could not speak. I was overcome by the emotions I felt flowing out of Cneajna. In so many ways we had both been confined by the restrictive rules of our societies, but where Cneajna saw her vampire life as freedom, I saw it as one more prison. Cneajna was content in this dark world and I was not. Where Cneajna loved Vlad for freeing her from her mortal life, I hated him for entrapping me in this vampire life.

“So, you see, dearest Glynis, we must do as he wishes, for in the end he will do what is best for us. He is wise. He is strong. As long as you obey him, he will not have reason to destroy your brother. He may even show favor to him and make him immortal, and then you would be with your beloved brother forever. You must do Vlad’s bidding and not complain. And soon, you will love him as I do.”

I did not, could not, respond to the fervent whispers of the vampire. I only listened and hardened my heart against Vlad. Even though Cneajna did not realize it, Vlad had trapped her in a prison more restrictive than her own cousin had at Visegrád. I am determined to escape Vlad at all cost.

I now realize I cannot openly defy him. I must curb my wicked tongue, even more than before. I will have to be cunning and shrewd to outwit him and eventually escape. I will have to be clever indeed, not merely subservient and hope for the best. All this I understood and took to heart as she spoke to me.

“Promise me, dear Glynis, promise me, you will obey him! That you will not harbor ill will against him and understand your place here,” she begged me fervently.

I looked into her anguished eyes, nodding slowly. “I promise, Cneajna. I will obey him.” I hoped that my eyes did not glow with my fiery resolve.

Chapter 17

The Journal of Angeline Wright

27th of November, 1819

Today was utterly dreadful. The news the post brought has devastated us to our core. I can barely stand my own despair. Even my child seemed distressed within me and I forced myself to rest for a few hours in the afternoon. How can one endure losing three members of one's family without going mad?

I finally rose and sought out my grieving husband. It was his wracking sobs that drew me to the doorway of the parlor. My own tears were wet upon my cheeks. My bare feet were silent against the floor as I padded toward him, one hand supporting my heavy stomach. The child within me stirred briefly, then settled down once more.

"Andrew, dearest?"

He did not move. Sprawled in a chair, his face in one hand, the other clutching the fateful letter from his only surviving sister, my dear husband was weeping for his family.

Oh, how dreadful is the parcel we received just this morn! I wish it had never arrived; that we had never opened it; that we had not found the letters within. There had been three letters: one from Sir Stephen of Buda, a letter from our beloved Glynis, and the last from Count Vlad Dracula. Sir Stephen's correspondence had been a brief letter of condolence. It had confused my husband until he had opened Glynis' letter and read of his family's demise in a tragic carriage accident on Bârgau Pass. He had instantly become inconsolable. I had to literally pry the letter from his fingers to read it.

I moved to the table where Susanna had laid out a tea tray for us. I could see he had touched nothing.

"Andrew, darling. Perhaps a cup of tea would help soothe your nerves," I said softly.

He looked up at me with confusion. His eyes were nearly swollen shut and his face was a deep red. "What is it, Angeline?"

"A cup of tea, love?"

He looked at the tray for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, please. I am parched."

I smiled slightly and quickly prepared a hot cup for him. It was a relief to see how gratefully he took it from my slightly trembling hands and commenced to sip it. After a few swallows, he set it down on his knee and peered into the dark liquid.

"I knew something was dreadfully wrong. I knew it."

"I know, darling. I know," I responded. I carefully lowered myself onto the

chair across from him. “But we must be happy that Glynis survived. It is a miracle we must be grateful for.”

Andrew nodded gravely. “Yes, yes. She is a strong girl. She would be the one to survive. But, Angeline, her letter is so odd. It is so stilted and so unlike her. She does not explain how the accident happened or what her condition is. Maybe it is May who survived and she is confused.”

“No, darling, she is in shock, and that is why her usual cleverness is missing from her writing.”

Andrew wiped his eyes on the cuff of his shirt and sniffled. “Father, Mother, and May, all gone. How can I survive this pain?”

“I am here for you, my love, and soon the baby will be here. Then Glynis will return to us and we shall be a family once more.” I took his hand and kissed it. “All will be well again. Not as it was, but it will be good. We just need to mourn their passing.” I wondered, for a moment if my words sounded as empty to him as they did to me.

Andrew nodded numbly, holding his sister’s letter against his chest. “I want them to return home. I want them to be alive. Here, with us.”

I looked down at the parcel on the floor and leaned over it. Lifting it up, I saw that Count Dracula’s letter remained unopened as were several small items wrapped in brown paper. “Have you not read the letter from Count Dracula yet, dearest?”

“I have not the heart to do it. Please read it to me, Angeline.”

I carefully broke the seal on the letter, briefly taking noticing of the figure of a dragon stamped into the red wax, then spread out the pages on my lap to read. “His writing is rather flamboyant, but I think I can make it out. Shall I start to read?”

“Yes, love, yes, please do,” Andrew whispered.

“Dearest sir, it is my misfortune to write to you informing you of the deaths of your beloved family. A terrible accident on Bârgau Pass has robbed them of life and only one sister has remained alive in this world. During a severe storm, your family’s carriage was swept off the pass into the river below. All were lost with the sole exception of Lady Glynis. My men found her half-drowned on the banks of the river and brought her to my castle. Upon my orders, my men searched for days for other survivors, but they were unable to find any other members of your unfortunate family.

“After your sister had recovered from her delirium, she told me what had happened and of her narrow escape from death. She is still quite ill and her body was battered during her ordeal. There is some disfigurement, which I think will fade away in time. She does not wish for me to discuss her condition at length at this time. I will continue to send you updates on her progress and inform you of a time when I can return her to your care.

“My solicitor, Sir Stephen, can answer any other inquiries you have

concerning your family and their journey. I am sending some small items that I believe belonged to your family. They were recovered on the banks of the Arges River.

“With my sincerest regards, your new friend, Count Dracula.”

Andrew moaned and closed his eyes. “What does he mean by disfigurement?”

“It does not say, Andrew.” I, too, had felt overwhelmed by that word. I did not want to think of what it could possibly mean for poor dear Glynis. My hands were trembling as I folded the letter. “Perhaps it is nothing permanent.”

“My dearest sister, what has happened to you?” Andrew murmured. In his despair, he covered his face to hide his tears.

I leaned forward and drew the two items bound in brown paper from the remains of the parcel. With quivering fingers, I unwrapped the paper until my father in law’s pocket watch and May’s little gold locket fell out onto my lap.

“Oh, Andrew. Look at what he has sent us!”

Andrew moved his hands away from his face and stared at the pocket watch and tiny locket for a long moment. “Oh, God. They are truly gone. It is not a dream,” he wailed.

I reached out to him as he collapsed into my embrace. Rocking him as I will my newborn babe, I whispered comforting words to him.

Oh, how shall we go on? How do we find any measure of peace when our hearts are so shattered? What am I to do?

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

The Castle

3rd of March, 1820

Ever since that terrifying night when I saw Erzsébet’s fate, I have bowed to Vlad’s wishes. I cannot express how difficult it has been to curb my natural inclination to defy him. But my brother and his family are all that I have left of my mortal life. I will do anything to protect them. Andrew, Angeline, and their newborn son are always in my thoughts. To save them, I must appear subservient. Reluctantly, I have accepted my fate as Vlad’s pawn.

Originally after my transformation, my only concern was escaping Vlad and the castle, but now I realize I have a greater calling. I must rescue what remains of my family from the evil designs of Count Vlad Dracula. I shall do whatever I must to accomplish that goal.

I even embark willingly to Vlad’s bedchamber now. I can grit my teeth and play the part of the loyal lover if it means I can maneuver myself into the position to free my brother from the fate of the rest of my family.

Over the last few months, there has been a flurry of correspondence between my brother and Vlad. Since I have obeyed Vlad and written letters in accordance

to what he desires, I am now allowed to read my brother's letters. I treasure those moments when I can curl up and read my brother's stark handwriting and steal a glimpse into the world I left behind. That alone has been reward enough for my obedience.

I must admit that this game I play is a cruel and dangerous one. I feel myself slipping into a darkness that frightens me, but I am willing to sacrifice a bit of my soul if it means saving that of my beloved brother.

There is a degree of shame that permeates me as I embrace this new life and find certain comforts in it. The powers that are growing within me excite me. They are a promise of freedom and victory. Also, I find myself growing more fond of Ariana and Cneajna and feel guilt for that affection. Is it a betrayal of my family to love them? In another world, in another time, Cneajna and my mother would have been steadfast friends. I could easily see Ariana dressed modernly and joining my English friends and me in our aristocratic amusements. Elina remains aloof and cold, but she is more civil now.

Tonight, Vlad freed us from the castle as a reward for my obedience. As soon as he gave the word, we were out the door, dashing madly into the night. Winter was dying as Spring rose her head and the night was cool and fresh with life.

We ran wildly, laughing gaily, our pale limbs carrying us deep into the forest. Tormented by the hunger, our senses were acute and dangerously accurate. It did not seem long before we found the campsite of a luckless hunter. Together, we crept slowly into the firelight, revealing ourselves slowly to his mesmerized eyes.

It did not take long before he yielded to our seductive kisses.

Blood, rich and full of life flowed past my lips and into my body as I drank. Crushing the helpless hunter against me, I drank in all that was left of his dying body. My sisters drank before me, for I am the last, lowliest Bride. Faintly over the fading heartbeat of my victim, I could hear them whispering to me, urging me in my feast. At last, the warm gush of blood ebbed away and I slowly sat back on my heels, letting the dead man slip from my cold embrace.

Gradually, my senses became aware of the world. The rustling of the trees, the caress of the night wind, and the sweet fragrance of blood filled my senses.

The moon tonight was full and bright above the cypress tress. The pure soft light illuminated the pale faces of my sisters as they rummaged about in the makeshift camp of the hunter. The blood of the hunter flowed through us, spreading life into our cold bodies and I sighed blissfully.

Ariana finished going through his personal belongings and threw up her hands. "Let us find another!"

I climbed to my feet as Elina stretched her arms over her head then fell forward, molding her body into that of a wolf. I am only now beginning to fully understand the extent of my new powers and I could not help but gasp at her transformation. It is easy enough to scale walls like a spider and leap great

distances. It is also so very natural to pass through the smallest cracks as though it were a regular doorway. But now, I am learning to think myself into a mist and solidify in the destination of my choice. Now, to see Elina transform herself into a wolf as Vlad had done astounded me. I did not realize such power was within my reach.

Elina's dark wolf shape howled and rushed away into the woods.

Laughing gleefully, Ariana pursued Elina into the woods. "Come, Glynis!"

Cneajna grabbed my hand. "Let us enjoy the night!"

I laughing, I twirled away from her. "Catch me if you can!"

I darted into the forest and Cneajna pursued. I dashed through the trees, a blur of luminescent white against the darkness, my limbs free of all human restraints. I found myself moving more quickly than I could have ever dreamed. With supernatural ease, I darted around trees and leapt over any obstacle in my path. I have never experienced such freedom. It was an intensely pleasurable experience to run without mortal breathlessness, pain or tiredness.

I tore through the thick foliage and in my haste, almost fell into a deep gorge cutting through the forest. Ariana caught me about the waist and saved me from a frightful fall. I clutched her tightly to me with great relief.

"You saved me!"

"You would not have died, but it would have hurt!"

Cneajna and Elina, returned to form, came to stand near us, luxuriating in the brilliant moonbeams illuminating their upturned countenance. The wind caressed their forms and their expressions were rapturous.

"It is a glorious night," Cneajna sighed with great contentment.

"I wish we could fly to the moon." Ariana raised her hands to the enormous orb glowing majestically in the dark sky above.

"Do not be ridiculous," Elina chided her. But she tilted back her head, letting the wind play with her hair, obviously as taken with the beauty of the night as we were.

The night did feel wonderful. So cool, refreshing, and lovely to my senses. It was a soothing balm to my beleaguered soul. I raised my hands slowly at my sides, feeling the wind rippling over my fingertips. Closing my eyes, I relaxed until I felt my feet slipping free of the ground. The wind lifted me up in a rush of invisible power as I threw back my head and laughed.

"Me, too!"

Daring to open my eyes and break the spell, I looked down at Ariana. She took my hand as she too slipped free earth. Together, we vampire sisters allowed the night breeze to lift us higher and higher until we were floating over the treetops. Our hands clasped tightly together, we drifted away over the forest.

This was a freedom I had never dared hope for: Freedom from the very laws of nature.

The wind rushed over my skin, flowing over me and through my hair, as I

took in the breathtaking beauty of the starry sky.

“Is it not so very, very lovely?” I whispered.

Our feet came to rest on the ground outside a low wall that surrounded a graveyard. There, rising majestically above the white headstones, was the tomb of the Countess Dolingen. I had been unsure of our destination, but now it seemed only natural that we should alight here. Erzsébet was part of us even if she did not live within the confines of the castle.

Holding hands, we vampire sisters moved down the path past the gravestones to the sepulcher that held our sister in eternal torment.

Ariana pushed open the bronze door and we filed into the darkness of the tomb one by one.

“Who is there?” Erzsébet’s voice called out in a sharp rasp from the darkness.

“It is I, Ariana, and I have brought Glynis with me,” my vampire sister responded with much tenderness.

The torches sprang to life at Ariana’s beckoning and illuminated the impaled form on the platform. She appeared even more tortured and frail than before, her face drawn and very white, her eyes tormented by the hunger.

Erzsébet let out a soft sob of relief and held out her hand to Ariana.

“My darling sisters, you have come to me.”

“I have come to soothe your torment,” Ariana responded, and moved toward her.

“Ariana, do not go near her! Vlad said-” I cried out in protest.

“He knows nothing,” Ariana said shortly, and moved to her sister’s side. Taking Erzsébet’s hand lovingly, Ariana smiled her sweet smile. “We fed tonight. Fresh blood, rich with life.”

Erzsébet was weeping, her body trembling with the terrible hunger of the vampire curse. “You have not come in so long.”

“Because of our new sister, he has not granted us the freedom required to come to you. But we will try to come again soon. And now, the blood you need.” Ariana leaned down over Erzsébet and kissed her forehead.

“Ariana, she will drain you!”

Ariana glanced back over her shoulder at me. “Glynis, you do not know our ways.”

Erzsébet closed her eyes and her lips trembled with anticipation.

Ariana rested her blood red lips against the pale trembling ones. Their lips parted and they were sealed in a deep kiss. Blood began to seep from between their lips, and I realized that Ariana was disgorging the blood from her gullet to feed our sister.

Overcome by the sight, I stepped back. I was almost ashamed to gaze upon this act, so intimate and strange, yet potent in its deep emotion.

“Before you came to us, we would come to feed her every few days. Since you were reborn, she has been starving,” Cneajna whispered in my ear.

Elina moved past me to Ariana's side. Cneajna placed a comforting arm around my trembling shoulders as I found myself compelled to watch this rite of blood and sisterly affection.

Ariana drew back, her lips red with blood, and Elina leaned over to take her place. Once more soft, gentle lips were met in a soft kiss that deepened as blood flowed.

"We give her what we can. If we were to give from our veins it would weaken us. But to give the blood that still has not renewed us, it is not so much of a sacrifice."

"Why did you not tell me of this?" I asked.

Cneajna tilted her head, regarding me with a slightly arched brow. "You need not know all that exists in our world. You will learn as it is time."

Elina broke her kiss with Erzsébet as Cneajna moved to the side of the impaled vampire. She gently caressed Erzsébet's cheek. "You are loved, my darling."

Erzsébet grasped Cneajna's hand tightly and kissed it softly over and over again, then whispered, "I knew you would come. You who have always loved me best."

Cneajna smiled softly. "You were not forgotten. You are one of us. We cannot endure you to suffer." Cneajna kissed Erzsébet's soft cheek, then covered her mouth with her own to feed her.

The other two Brides stood at their side, watching solemnly. I could not help but notice that they did not look at the iron stake, but only at Erzsébet's lovely face. This fate was too horrible to dwell upon for long.

Cneajna finished and stood back. Her gaze turned to me. "You do not have to give if it is not your desire."

I hesitated, then stepped forward. "I want to know her."

As I drew near, I could see the ugly wound that surrounded the iron stake impaling Erzsébet. The pain she endures must be unbearable. With trembling fingers, I reached out and grabbed hold of the iron stake. With all my strength I attempted to pull it upwards and out of her, but it did not move.

"We have all tried," Elina said. "All of us. Together. It does not move."

Erzsébet reached out and her cold hand closed over mine. Gently, her long fingers stroked mine. Our matching ruby rings glittered in the torchlight. She drew my hand to her lips and kissed it. Her eyes were golden and burned with a strange fever as her red lips spread into a sorrowful smile.

"There is no hope for me, my sister. I am trapped here forever. Neither alive nor dead. This is my fate."

"It is too cruel! To cruel a fate!" I gripped her hand tightly in mine and pressed it to my bosom. I was overcome by the woman's serene beauty. The languid tones of her speech were soothing to my ear and I felt drawn to this imprisoned woman. She was magnificently beautiful with her rounded cheeks

and delicate mouth. With a pang of sadness I realized that the vampire reminded me of my own mortal mother.

The Countess Dolingen reached up her hands to touch my face with a mother's tenderness as I wept. Drawing me down, she whispered to me in urgent tones. "When he brought you to me, I looked upon your face and I saw my own strong will, my own pride, my own strength. You will escape him. I know this as assuredly as I know I shall die in this tomb. I know it. I have seen it in my dreams. He will not be able to hold you."

Tears fell freely from my eyes as I pressed her hands against my face. "I shall. I shall escape him."

Erzsébet smiled then reached her hands out to her other vampire sisters. They gathered around her, their love for her a soothing balm to her torment. As we gathered near her and touched her reverently, I realized I had fully become a true sister in this strange family of vampire women.

Then the serenity of the tomb was broken. I felt an incredible pain rip through my abdomen. Gasping, I fell to my knees. It felt as if I was being torn apart.

Elina helped me back to my feet and steadied me. "It is the beckoning. He is pulling you back! If you do not go now, the pain will only worsen. You must go now!"

"What do you mean? I do not understand!"

"He is calling you to him. You must go! I can feel his power all around you," Cneajna urgently. "You must go now! He must not come looking for you and find us here!"

I could feel the pain of the Beckoning ripping through me as I stumbled out into the graveyard. The wind ripped at me, no longer my friend, but my enemy. It tore viciously at my hair and dress, pushing and pummeling me along. Above me, the glorious moon was overcome by the menace of quickly forming storm clouds. The night was transforming all about me: growing darker and more menacing with every passing moment.

"Glynis!"

I heard his voice loudly, echoing within and without me. Again I felt a sharp pain within me, as though someone had wedged an anchor within me and was now pulling on the chain, wrenching me forward. I threw myself forward into the wind, letting the pull of the beckoning guide me. Hurtling forward, the world became a blur as I willed myself back to the castle. The forest and the sky became a surreal panorama as I flowed through the wind back to the place of my captivity.

It was not until I finally fell against the great door of the castle that the pain of the beckoning lessened. The door swung open and I fell into the great hall. Rolling onto my back, I looked up into the cruel face of Vlad Dracula. His eyes were cold and he motioned to me briskly.

"Come to the library," he said.

I struggled to my feet, but the pain was still great within me. I could feel the invisible cord that tied me to Vlad still pulling me along behind him. Staggering forward, I reached out to him.

“Master, please. Please, release me of this pain!”

Falling against him, I inadvertently clutched his medallion to keep myself from falling. Vlad held me close and I could feel the bond between us flare hot within me, then ebb away. Fully released of the power of his call, I stood trembling. He did not even look into my face, but brushed me aside and moved through the gloom of the castle.

“Come, Glynis. Now.”

“I am coming,” I snapped irritably.

Anger, fresh and raw, was ignited within me. I hated his power over me. The power he had to keep me trapped in this damned castle. His power to call me back against my will to his side. The power he wielded over me to frighten me and force me to obey his commands. I hated him with every step I took. I hated myself for my weakness.

Somehow, I will rise up and rob him of his power.

“Hurry,” Vlad barked.

I gritted my teeth as my eyes burned with rage, but I obeyed. I followed his dark, pensive form down the decaying corridors of the castle to the library he spent so many hours within planning and plotting his way to England.

As Vlad entered the library, he threw off his long cloak and fell into a chair next to the table. His face was impassive, not a single emotion escaping his cold green eyes. He motioned me to the chair opposite him with a quick jab of one finger.

Obediently, I sat down.

Vlad stared at me for a long time, his gaze penetrating, yet devoid of emotion. The room was so silent, so dead, like a tomb, that when he did speak, his voice was like a peal of thunder.

“We have a matter to discuss, dear wife,” he started. His hands slid a stack of papers across the table to me. “It has been more than half a year since you joined my household.”

I started in my chair, my mouth agape in surprise. “It cannot be!”

“Oh, but it is.”

I quickly sorted through my thoughts, remembering my journey here, my rebirth, the events since that time, the dates at the top of Andrew’s letters, the change of the season. Over seven months of torment had passed, feeling more like the passing of a month or two.

“Glynis, please pay attention,” Vlad said shortly.

I snapped my head up, fastening my gaze upon him. “I apologize. I was lost in thought. What were you saying?”

“There is much we have to discuss.” Vlad gave me a piercing look. “Now

listen. Your brother has written my solicitor informing to inform me he will be coming to Buda. In fact, according to the dates he has given, he is already in transit. He is bringing along an English physician to examine you. He wants Sir Stephen to bring him here to our home so that you may be examined and the physician can determine if you can travel back to England.”

I let out a cry and quickly stifled it behind my hand. Andrew was coming here! To save me! No, he could not! Vlad would destroy him!

“No! He cannot!” I rose sharply to my feet and stood boldly before Vlad. “I will not allow you to harm him!”

Vlad stood, took me by the shoulders, forcing me back into the chair. “Do not be a simpleton! I do not intend to harm him. I need him. I will not make another mistake by destroying my connections to English society. I need you to listen to me, Glynis, and not be your usual annoyingly opinionated self!”

I gripped his cold, dry hand firmly, my gaze imploring him. “Promise me you will not harm him. Promise me!”

Vlad slapped me hard across the cheek. “Listen to me and stop your dramatics.”

I could taste blood on my tongue and seeping down my throat. Though I wanted to fight back, I resisted, reminding myself of my vow to my brother and his family, and once more played the obedient wife.

Vlad slid the papers in front of me. “This is the letter your brother wrote. My solicitor has studied the itinerary your brother sent us and has charted his journey. He should arrive in Buda in two weeks. Instead of journeying here, I plan to meet him in Buda.”

“He will insist on seeing me,” I said in a low voice. “He will demand that you bring him here.”

“But I will not bring him here,” Vlad responded. Before I could protest he added, “I am taking you to Buda with me.”

It took a few seconds for me to fully comprehend what he had said. “You are taking me to Buda?”

Vlad nodded his head, sitting down next to me. “I need your help to deceive your brother. We will journey to Buda and stay in my home there. Sir Stephen will have your brother stay with him. My house is undergoing several restorations at this time. I need to make some additions to ensure our safety against vampire hunters. Your brother should understand we do not wish to inconvenience him, but that we cannot accept guests at this time. We will tell your brother that we have married and that you are now Countess Dracula of Wallachia. Is this clearly understood by you?”

I nodded, too overcome to say a word.

“We will explain that your face has been disfigured by the accident, but that I fell in love with you and took you as my most beloved bride.”

“Disfigured?” I frowned. “I do not understand.”

Vlad reached out and caressed my face tenderly with one hand. "You are more beautiful than you were. A mortal that did not know you in your previous life would take your beauty as breathtaking and extraordinary, but not supernatural. But a mortal who knew you well would instantly see that you are more than human now. Your brother would only have to look into your eyes and see that you are Undead. I want your brother to help us establish an estate in England and arrange our entrance into British society as aristocrats. I do not want him to fear us or betray us to the vampire hunters. Do you understand?"

It was so much to absorb. Andrew coming to this strange, terrifying yet beautiful land. Vampire hunters stalking Vlad. The deceit over my appearance. And the glorious thought of traveling to Buda. I was overcome with emotion.

"Yes, yes, I do understand," I answered finally.

In truth, I do not want my brother to see me as I am now. I am ashamed of my ethereal beauty and sensuality. To have Andrew see what I have become is too horrible to bear. I still recall my mother's aghast expression when she had finally realized the vampire standing before her was actually her daughter.

"Good. Once in Buda I will have a veil made to cover your face. Now listen carefully. I do not want you to take any dress, piece of jewelry, or anything that your brother would recognize. I told him all was lost in the accident and if he sees you in any gown you owned in England, he will doubt my word. Take the dresses your mother bought for you in Paris and I will give you Erzsébet's jewels to wear. Understand?"

"Yes, Master," I answered softly. I could barely believe what I was hearing him say. I am leaving the castle to go to Buda! To visit my brother! It is marvelous and frightening. To see Andrew will be marvelous, but I am so afraid for him. Vlad tends to be so temperamental. Andrew could be in great danger.

"You know the power of the beckoning now. When I call you, you must always come to me. In Buda I will grant you the freedom you do not have here. You will hunt on your own and learn the powers of the night. It is time for you to show your loyalty to me and prepare to rise to the position of my true bride. When we journey to England and establish ourselves there, you will be my first bride and I want to trust you."

I looked up at him sharply. "But what of Cneajna. She is the first," I said.

Vlad ran his hands over my hair and smoothed it back, his cold eyes studying my face with piercing intensity. "Someday, when you learn to love me as your sisters do, I will share with you my many secrets." He kissed me and I allowed him to. It was merely a press of lip to lip. "Already, I am terribly fond of you."

I gazed up at him solemnly. "You frighten me."

"Yes, I know." He kissed me again, then whispered against my lips. "You shall do as I say or I will kill your brother."

"Yes, I know," I echoed his words and tone.

And I began to cry tears of joy and fear.

Chapter 18

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

5th of March, 1820

And we are off!

Tonight we departed for Buda and my excitement can barely be contained. Let me digress and explain how the evening began...

The carriage rocked gently as it rolled slowly out of the courtyard of the castle. I leaned forward and glanced out the window back toward the three ghostly women clustered together in the great doorway. Cneajna raised her hand over head, and I waved back with a smile.

A cold, dreary rain fell through the gloom. An icy mist wafted over the wet flagstones of the courtyard. Thick, black clouds shrouded the moon and lightning cracked the sky as the distant booming of thunder resounded. It was a horrible night to begin our journey to Buda.

"Close the window and sit back," Vlad ordered shortly.

I obeyed, sitting back sullenly. I pouted slightly. I am quite sure my eyes were vivid with my anger. It was impossible not to recollect the last time I departed Prince Vlad Dracula's castle to journey to Buda and not feel bitterness. My family's failed attempt to escape haunted me.

Dressed in one of the beautiful dresses my mother had purchased for me in Paris, I looked like a fine, young aristocrat. With Cneajna's assistance, I had cut my hair so I could style it into a more modern, fashionable style that suited the Lady Glynis of the past, but not necessarily the vampire I am now.

As usual, Vlad was dressed all in black, his fine new suit impressive on his frame. Despite his penchant to wear very out of fashion clothes in the castle, I noted he always wore the best in modern clothing when departing the castle. He had even allowed me to cut his hair to a more reasonable length and trim his mustache. He had seem bemused by the whole process. Though his thick auburn hair remained long, it was much tidier, and I was satisfied that he had bowed to my wishes. He now looked more like a businessman than a cold-blooded warrior of old.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a gold pocket watch and flipped it open. With a sigh, he clicked it shut.

"What is wrong?" I asked.

"The storm will slow us down. I want to be through Bârgău Pass and onto Bistrița as soon as possible."

"And why is that?"

Vlad regarded me coolly then frowned. "I have many enemies."

“Is that why we did not fly to Buda?”

“Fly?” Vlad began to laugh with delight. “Fly?”

“Well, yes. I can fly. Can you not as well?” I was rather insulted by his laughter and my voice was quite condescending.

“Oh, of course I can fly. But to fly takes much blood-power and there is the possibility of violating another vampire's territory. They do not like grandiose shows of power. We must travel as mortals to ensure our safety.”

“Other vampires?”

“Yes, of course. You did not think we were the only ones, did you?”

“No, not truly,” I confessed. “But are you not the Prince of this country?”

Vlad sighed a bit. “I was a mortal prince of this country. But as a vampire, I am restricted by the curse of the day. I did not realize this as a mortal man when I made the choice to become what I am now. I struggled for years to regain my principedom, but I could never wield the influence necessary to secure my throne again. But, yes, Glynis, I control all that surrounds our castle. If any vampire enters our domain, they either respect me as a Master or I slay them.”

“So are there many of us?”

“In this country, yes. In other countries, that are not so rich with legend and magic, we are but a few. You might as well know that some vampires are quite mad and dangerous and we must destroy them on sight lest they expose us. If too many humans die from the vampire bite, it brings the vampire hunters. You must be alert at all times. If you encounter another vampire, merely tell them you are my progeny and they will let you be. I am still a feared man in this country, just not among mortals.”

I considered this then asked, “So is there some sort of code among vampires?”

Vlad laughed at this. “You amuse me so, Glynis.” He shook his head. “No, no. Some of the older vampires of have tried --actually they are still attempting -- to impose some sort of vampire law upon us, but they have continuously failed. Vampires as old as I and older are too set in their own ways to bow to any modern concepts of civility. Besides, most vampires carve out small territories for themselves. Nothing official, mind you, but it is theirs because they make it so. There are some vampire families, such as ours, that keep certain precepts and that is their choice. But no, Glynis, there is no vampire code.”

I pondered this for some time, then turned to him. “Our land is ours. But what of Buda?”

Vlad's expression darkened slightly. “There is another. He rules there. Again, if anyone disturbs you, merely inform them that you are my progeny. He allows me freedom in the city.”

“Allows you?” I arched an eyebrow.

Vlad frowned as his gaze slowly slid toward me. “I still rule over those below me, dear wife, even if I sometimes bow to a another. I learned the rules of politics long ago in the court of King Matayas. You are merely a bride, my wife,

hardly more than a servant.”

I openly glared at him for that. My belligerence burned in my gaze as I lifted my chin. “You are wrong. I am so much more than a mere servant.”

“Are you now?”

I gave him my most arrogant of smiles. “Oh, yes.”

Vlad began to chortle with delight. “Really, Glynis, you amuse me so.”

“You doubt me?”

Vlad's eyes narrowed as he studied me. I tried to look as innocent and wide-eyed as possible. By the smirk on his face, I could see he saw clearly past this façade.

“You are a clever woman, I shall give you that much.”

“One night, you shall know just how clever I truly am.”

Vlad reached out and gripped my face tightly in one hand. I could feel his fingers digging into my skin, his long nails drawing blood. “Do not threaten me.”

I lowered my eyes. “I am not threatening you. I am merely promising you that one night you shall see me rise to my full potential.”

“You speak in riddles.” Vlad dismissed me with the flick of his hand.

I turned away from him, my face flushed, and stared into the forest flowing past the window. Vlad may dismiss me now, but one night, he will be at my mercy. He will witness my full power and brutality as I have my vengeance. It will happen. Vlad will know what it feels like to stare into my face and know fear.

The storm broke over us with vicious violence. The carriage groaned in protest, and I was forced to grab hold of the safety straps. The lightning cackling across the sky clearly illuminated the treacherous pass we were traveling over.

Vlad glanced dispassionately out of the window at the massive thunderheads rolling over the valley. “It is a lovely night.”

I gaped at him then gasped as the carriage swerved sharply around a turn in the road.

“We will make good time no matter what force of nature attempts to delay us,” Vlad declared confidently. “We shall arrive in Bistrița on time.”

I glanced at him rather sullenly, none too pleased with the weather conditions. The carriage lurched and swayed, but resolutely slogged along the rain soaked pass. I clung tightly to the safety straps and whispered a prayer I was uncertain would reach the ears of God.

The carriage sped into the stormy night and down the mountain into the valley below. As we passed through the tiny village of Rosu-the same village my family had tried in vain to find safety in that fateful day nearly a year before-I peered out the window. I felt tears, warm and passionate threatening to spill down my cheeks. We had been so close, so very, very close.

The quaint buildings emerged from the gloom into the light of the carriage

lanterns for a brief moment before being swallowed up into the night. Not a soul was to be seen. Only the village inn was illuminated from within. As the carriage roared past, I pressed my nose against the glass of the carriage window in an attempt to see inside. The inn shutters were drawn beneath wreaths of garlic and only slivers of firelight escaped through the cracks of wood.

The carriage rolled on and was devoured by the darkness of the night. I sat back in my seat, a single tear traveling down my flushed cheek.

Vlad cast a searing glance in my direction, and I lowered my eyes.

“You should not mourn after all this time. You are more than you were. You are beyond anything your parents could have ever imagined for you,” he said.

Could he possibly expect me to be grateful for my fate?

“I cannot help but mourn my family. They were my life,” I retorted. “Do you not mourn your mortal family?”

“They served their purpose,” Vlad responded.

I opened my mouth to protest, but realized quickly the futility of it. He cannot possibly understand my emotions. I do not believe he has ever experienced them. His passions burn fierce, but are tinged with violence and anger. My own passions are stirred by love.

Our journey, though long in hours, seemed quickly finished. I found myself deep in thought, dwelling in the comfort of memories. How easily I lost myself in the beauty of the past. I daydreamed of tea parties, balls, and shopping expeditions. I relished the memories of time spent with my siblings and my parents. I fondly dwelt on my friends and the beauty of England.

Of course, I know not what Vlad thought of during our journey. He was still, silent, and reflective. His gaze was steadfast upon the terrain we traveled over. I wondered if he was remembering his other life.

We arrived in Bistrița in the early hours of the morning. The sun was still below the horizon and the air was crisp. The town was shrouded in a heavy mist and it was difficult to make out the ancient buildings that so carried the flavor of the Carpathians. Our driver drew the carriage up to Golden Krone Hotel. Immediately, the door flew open and a man hurried down to open the carriage door.

“Count and Countess Dracula, welcome, welcome!”

The proprietor was a man in his early thirties and he seemed flushed with both fear and excitement. Behind him, porters dressed in traditional garb rushed out to help unload our luggage.

Vlad exited first and turned to offer his hand. His gaze was startling and passionate when I looked upon his face. I realized, in that moment, he was desperate for me to play the role... no, to be his wife to the world beyond the castle. I obliged him, took his hand, and slid effortlessly from the carriage.

“Countess Dracula, how lovely to see you. Your husband wrote that you were accompanying him, and we have prepared the best room in the hotel for

your stay!” He kissed my hand a few too many times, then motioned us into the hotel.

“How many hours until sunrise?” Vlad asked.

“Two, sir,” was the reply.

“Very well. Please see my lovely wife to her rooms. I have pressing business to attend to.” Vlad turned to me and drew me close to kiss my cheek. He whispered, “Stay in the hotel. Do not leave. I will soon return.” He kissed me gently on the cheek and released my hand.

I looked at him curiously, then he was gone.

“The best room! You have the best room,” my host assured me. He was so nervous I could smell it.

He knows, I thought. He knows what we are.

The hotel was quaint, very exotic in its flavor. I found it charming and comfortable. The proprietor anxiously guided me through the hotel to my rooms. He flung open the windows to show off the view, only to see darkness and mist. His face drew quite crimson.

“Of course, it is much more...during the day...” He hesitated, then said, “It does not matter!”

After I assured him over and over again that I was quite settled and that I was quite all right and that I did not need anything more, he left me.

Wearily, I took off my traveling bonnet and laid it on the bed, then sat down. I fluffed my skirts beneath my velvet coat, glanced about the room, and then flung myself back on the bed.

I was annoyed that I was left behind in the hotel. I wanted to hunt, to explore, anything but sit in our hotel room. I opened a trunk and discarded my traveling clothes for a nice silky dress. I felt put out by the lack of any adequate servants, but managed. Glancing about, I quickly realized that much like the castle, there was not a looking glass to be seen. I stomped my foot in irritation.

For a small bit of time, I attempted to read a book. It was bland and boring. I tossed it away.

I stood at the window and stared out at the darkened streets. The mist was thick and heavy so there was not much of a view.

Of course Vlad's absence would be a curse wrapped up in a blessing.

I was dreadfully bored.

At last I wandered downstairs and found a small parlor. The room was shrouded in darkness save for the pool of yellowish light pouring out from the flames in the fireplace.

Sighing, I wandered up to the mantle and stood there. Reflexively, I attempted to warm my cold hands. Of course, they would never be warm again, unless I was freshly gorged on blood. I was a pale, cold woman, a wraith, wandering the night in search for blood.

Actually, that sounds rather romantic. But beyond that, I was feeling rather

morose and quite lonely.

My previous journey had been with my family and this was quite different and I felt utterly, dreadfully lonely.

I stood for a rather long time staring into the flames, watching them dance and shiver. The fire mesmerized me. I let my mind think of nothing but the gentle sway of the fire's dance as it crackled and whispered to me.

“It is rather late for a lady to be wandering about.”

A man's voice broke my reverie.

I turned around on my heel.

In the very corner of the room was a chair, and in this chair, utterly shrouded in darkness, sat a man. I could barely see the dim outline of his body, long and lean it appeared. Only his pale hands resting on his knees were visible.

“Really?”

He laughed. “Really. I take it you just arrived?”

I wrinkled my nose slightly at his forthrightness. “Well, yes, as a matter of fact. But I really do not see what concern that is of yours.”

The man laughed softly, and said in perfect English, “I was merely trying to converse with a lovely lady on a very morose night. I, too, have been traveling long, and a bit of conversation seemed like a sweet indulgence.”

“You are British?” I said it eagerly, my eyes wide with hope.

I could barely see him shake his head. I truly needed to feed. I could not see his features at all.

“I am not British, but I have traveled there on many occasion.”

I moved across the parlor to sit in the chair opposite him. Still, I could not see his face.

“Have you been there recently? I miss it so!”

“Not in a long while. I am traveling from Vienna to Buda.”

“As are we,” I admitted.

“You are with your family, I assume.”

“With my...husband,” I confessed, trying to keep the disgust from my tone.

“Glynis,” Vlad's voice said from the doorway.

I looked up to see him standing tall and straight, his broad shoulders squared and taut. His long hair fell down around his face and was a bit disheveled.

“Come...now.” He thrust out his hand to me.

I turned to excuse myself, but my companion...yes...this is quite odd...my companion was gone.

Mystified, I stared at the chair, blinking rapidly, unsure of what had just occurred. Had I been speaking with a specter?

“Glynis...now.”

I reached out. Vlad took my hand and drew me quickly to him. “We are not staying. We are leaving.”

“What?”

He drew me behind him quickly, nearly at a supernatural pace. I could see beyond the front doors the porters anxiously loading the carriage.

“I do not understand!”

“You need not understand,” Vlad responded as we hurried outside.

He thrust me up into the carriage, then swung up behind me. The door slammed shut.

I could hear the men strapping our luggage onto the carriage, their voices soft and hurried. Vlad was bristling, I realize now, with rage. I shrank back in my seat and tried not to draw his attention.

There was a sharp order and the carriage was off.

“Why are we leaving?”

Vlad ignored my question and sat in angry, unrelenting silence.

I sighed, settling back in the seat. How like Vlad to disregard me and exclude me from what may be a very dire situation. Obviously, we would not have left so abruptly if something was not terribly amiss. I wondered if perhaps the other vampires he had spoken of were the reason for our abrupt departure.

“I suppose that it was utterly necessary for us to depart a perfectly lovely hotel with a nice comfortable bed,” I said, not able to help myself. I was very discontent at the prospect of sleeping in the carriage. “I am sure it will be perfectly lovely sleeping in a lurching carriage.”

Vlad regarded me for a moment, then ignored me.

I frowned at him.

He reached out and drew a thick heavy metal sheet down over the window across from my seat. I watched as he secured the metal blinds to the windows with heavy locks.

“Close the window beside you,” he ordered.

“Should we not turn back and take shelter at the hotel?” I answered. I admit that I was desperate in my curiosity to know why we had fled.

“It is too dangerous. We will continue on in safety. The driver will only stop to change the horses and pick up our escort at the edge of the forest,” Vlad answered. “Now, hurry and close that window!”

My fingers found the edge of the metal plate and began to pull it down over the window when a light glimmered through the trees and I hesitated. It was then I realized that the sky was brightening above the horizon. Soft pink clouds slipped across the now tranquil sky over the tops of the pine trees.

“The sun,” I whispered in awe.

How long had it been since I have seen its wonderful, beautiful light and felt its warmth?

“The sun is rising,” I said in awe.

Vlad finished double locking the carriage doors and swiveled about.

“Glynis!”

Sunlight struck the hand I had pressed against the glass of the window. I

screamed as my flesh began to burn. Vlad dove over me and slammed the metal shielding down, blocking the sun's deadly brilliance. He quickly twisted the latches into place and locked them, effectively obstructing the rays of the rising sun.

I lay where I had fallen over on the seat, staring at my hand in shock. It was a terrible sight and dreadfully painful. Huge blisters covered my palm and my fingertips were singed.

“Damn you, Glynis! Are you trying to kill yourself?”

“I have not seen the sun in so long,” I answered in a hushed tone. “I had forgotten its appearance and how it felt on my skin.”

Vlad fell back into his own seat and sighed with exasperation. “Well, now the sun is death, Glynis. You know this! Should you ever be caught in the sunlight, you shall die.”

I sat up and extended my hand to him. “Look! Look! Look what the sun has done to me!”

“Vlad took my hand gruffly and twisted it this way and that to examine my burns. “Yes, yes, you burned yourself.”

“It hurts dreadfully,” I told him. But it made me happy to feel such pain. It felt like mortal pain and it made me feel wondrously alive. I was transfixed by the sight, yet mortified. It slowly dawned on me how stupid I had been. The sunlight could have struck my face and caused me enormous harm.

Vlad grabbed my wrist. “Never do this again. Understand?”

“Yes, yes, I promise.”

Vlad slashed his own cheek with his long nails. He bloodied his fingers, then spread his blood over my burned hand. The burns ceased to hurt and began to fade away. My hand healed until it was perfect and whole.

“There. Now, sleep. I know it will be hard. When I travel, I am never able to fall fully into the depths of our vampire slumber, but we must rest ourselves.”

“What about vampire hunters? Will they attack the carriage,” I asked.

“That is why we are about to meet our armed escort. They will protect us by day,” Vlad answered. He sat back in his seat and placed his hands on his knees. With a soft sigh, he closed his eyes and began to sink into the vampire sleep.

I sat in silence, staring at my hand. The carriage was still traveling quite fast and rocked gently. I was beginning to feel very tired. Finally, I curled up on the cushioned seat and closed my eyes. The darkness within the carriage was absolute, yet soothing. Yet, I was starkly aware of the searing sunlight beating down on the carriage. It frightened me to think of it pressing down all around me.

“Don't think of it. Just sleep,” Vlad muttered.

Before I could think another thought, I was asleep.

Chapter 19

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright-Continued

6th of March, 1820

I awoke before Vlad this evening and wrote what I could in my journal. It was rather disturbing to glance over and see him sitting across from me, eyes closed, his face shrouded in darkness. I was uncertain he was truly asleep, but he did not stir as I slipped my journal from its hiding place in my small travel case.

I wrote for some time, pouring all I could into the journal about my experiences from last night.

So engrossed was I in my writing that I was not aware of when his green eyes opened and fastened upon me.

“What is that?” he asked.

I looked up, startled, quite alarmed by his tone.

He held out his hand to me imperiously. His long nails were wickedly curved.

Reluctantly, I slid my journal into his hand. He flipped through it, glancing at the pages, then closed it, and handed it back to me.

“Make certain mortals never find it,” he said, and the issue was dismissed.

Grateful that he had not taken upon himself to read through the journal, I tucked it away so that he would not be inspired to do so.

Soon I understood why he had no interest in trivial things. He opened up the metal shades and looked out at the night. The depths of his green eyes were tinted with the blaze of an internal fire and his teeth were quite long and the tips were visible beneath the brush of his mustache.

I realized the hunger was upon him.

He must have previously arranged for the carriage to stop so that we could feed. It was not long after we had awakened that the carriage rolled to a jarring stop.

Vlad was so charged with anticipation, he was perched on the very edge of his seat. I, too, began to feel the burning in my veins that was sheer torment. Perhaps it was his blood lust that stirred my own, but I could feel the tips of my fangs pressing against my lips.

I gazed out of the window up at the moon and smiled. The sight of the glowing orb reminded me of my freedom and of our destination. I was far from the castle and I would now feed freely, without having to wait for my vampire sisters to feed first.

I could see that we had stopped on the outskirts of a small village, and I knew that the hunt was about to begin. I was enthralled at the thought of hunting without my sisters and my eyes began to burn as my senses became acute. I slid off my coat and placed my bonnet on the seat so I could hunt unfettered.

A gypsy guard opened the door to the carriage and Vlad slipped out quickly.

He turned to me and quite to my surprise, helped me down from the carriage. As my feet settled onto the dew-drenched grass, I breathed in the scents of the night. A tingling in my nostrils let me know that my prey was quite close.

Vlad took my face in one hand, drawing my attention. "Only one. Find yourself one mortal then hurry back."

"I may go alone?"

Vlad's hawkish face was truly frightening bathed in the light from the moon. "If you do not return, I will find you and you will suffer."

"Yes, of course. I would expect nothing less for such a transgression," I said with great impudence.

"Go," Vlad growled.

I needed no more prompting. With wild glee, I darted into the field beside the road. I began to run toward the alluring scent that had caught my attention. When I reached the edge of the field, I turned into the forest. The moonlight fell through the leafy boughs and illuminated a path for me across the forest floor. It did not take me long to break out of the trees into a clearing where a small farmer's hut stood dark and forlorn.

Closing my eyes, I listened to the wind singing in my ears and breathed in the sweet scents of the night. Fresh, young blood was in the cottage. I could hear the heartbeats of the two people nestled within beckoning me to their side.

I smiled brightly as the anticipation of my feeding bubbled up within me. Reaching up, I freed my hair from its bindings and let it fall free to my waist. Slowly, I began to advance on the small cottage.

Wake up!

My voice was silent, a cry into the dreams of my prey, not a spoken whisper.

Wake up!

Opening my eyes, I looked at the tightly shuttered window. Languidly, I moved closer to the house watching as the dappled moonlight danced with the shadows across the white walls. The trees were swaying to the music of the night and it lulled me into a languor.

Come to the window! Come now!

I sensed movement within the house. My eyes sharpened their focus, concentrating on the shutters.

Open the window! Open it now!

Slowly, the shutters opened. Standing in the darkness of his small bedroom stood a young man, his tousled hair falling into eyes that were heavily laden with sleep.

I spread out my arms and moved forward slowly. I could see the farmer struggling to clear his muddled mind.

No, no, do not be afraid. Look at me. Look into my eyes. Am I not beautiful? Do you not wish to kiss me?

The young man shrank back into the gloom of the hovel in fear and I sprang

forward. I landed lightly on the ledge of the window and stared into the darkened room. A large bed dominated the room and by the lumpy shape on the mattress I realized there was a very pregnant woman asleep under the quilts. Her husband breathed heavily, leaning back against the bed, staring at me; the beautiful, ethereal creature perched in his window.

“Please...”

“Invite me in,” I urged him in a seductive voice. I knew my eyes were glowing in the darkness. I could see a blue haze coloring my clothes and skin.

“I cannot...” the farmer protested in a whisper.

I licked my lips with my pink tongue and focused my gaze on him. “Look at me. Do you not wish to kiss me?”

The young man stared at me with horror and yet, with desire. I could see it in the way he cast his gaze warily at his sleeping wife, then back at me. His desire was growing for me. He was drinking in my translucent skin and piercing aquamarine eyes. I could see that my long red tresses mesmerized him as they fluttered around the soft curves of my body. Falling back on the bed, he pulled the heavy quilt over him in an attempt to hide his body’s arousal.

“Come...in,” he finally whispered.

I smiled and dropped into the room that I could not have entered without invitation. The young man wiggled back to his side of the bed, his eyes watching me as I slowly advanced on him. When I pulled up my heavy skirts and placed one knee on the mattress, he moaned with anticipation. As I crawled toward him, I could not help but lick my long fangs. The farmer gasped, but did not move. He was foolishly clutching the quilt up around his neck. I reached out one hand and pulled it gently from his grasp.

The wife stirred, mumbling under breath.

The farmer froze.

My gaze shifted to the woman.

“Please, don’t...”

One sharp look silenced him.

I leaned over the woman, one hand sweeping back the woman’s dark hair from her face. Pressing my lips against the woman’s forehead, I murmured, “Sleep in peace. Do not awaken.”

The woman sighed and her head slumped away from me.

“Now, for you,” I said with a smile.

The farmer swallowed hard as I moved over him and sat on his stomach. Looking down on him, I could not help but feel disgusted by his weakness. His wife was heavy with child and he was hoping that I would ravish him while his wife slept. It almost made me want to kill him, but I knew that soon a child would be born in the small cottage and it would need its father. I would take only what I needed.

Sliding my hands over his chest, I bent down toward him. He strained

upwards for a kiss, but I pushed his face aside with one hand, exposing his throat. He was moaning beneath me, waiting for my passion to overwhelm him. With a soft hiss, I drew back my lips and drove my teeth into his neck.

I drank deeply, feeling his young blood coursing through me, renewing me. I drank until his heart began to grow weaker, then tore my mouth from the wound I had inflicted upon his neck. Still straddling him, I licked my lips with contentment.

A soft groan drew my attention back to my victim. He was gazing up at me with adoration mixed with horror.

“Come back to me again,” he whispered fervently. “Take me again! I want to be yours!”

I felt disgusted by his words and floated off the bed to the window.

He scrambled off the bed after me. “Please, my lady, please. I will serve you. I will do as you ask. I willingly give you my body. I will love you! Please!”

I caught him by the throat and tossed him back onto the bed with disgust. With one fierce thought directed into his drunken mind, I forced him to give up his memory of me.

Forget... for this was merely a dream.

He lay there, panting, his eyes closing in sleep.

I leaped out of the cottage and ran into the forest. I dismissed my victim’s amorous requests from my mind as I leapt about with wild abandon, feeling the blood within me spreading its life into my limbs. There was pure joy in the renewal that came with the feeding. Catapulting myself across the field in one great leap, I landed next to the carriage with a whoop of sheer delight.

One of the gypsy guards quickly opened the carriage door for me and I regarded him through slitted eyes. With one quick gesture, I grabbed him and kissed him so hard, I felt one of his teeth crack. Then I shoved him away and climbed into the carriage.

Vlad arrived a half-hour later. Moving into the carriage, he found me happily humming to myself. The blood of my victim had me drunkenly giddy. Perhaps it was my prey’s own frustrated sexual desires that had seeped into me through his blood, but I had never felt quite so aroused by the power of the feeding. When I saw Vlad’s stern expression, I burst into peals of laughter.

“That man out there. His mouth is swollen. Did you do that?”

“I kissed him!” I began to convulse with laughter. “They all want me. Every single one. Every time they look upon me, they forget their own names. He was lusty for a kiss so I kissed him!”

“You are drunk,” Vlad decided. “Young fresh blood full of mortal desires has clouded your mind.”

“I do not care,” I answered glibly. “It was wonderful to feed so freely.”

Vlad regarded me for a long moment, then slammed the door shut behind him

before reaching for me. I recoiled at first, then he pulled me into his embrace. I could smell the fresh blood on his breath.

“Your victim... a woman...” I whispered.

“Yes,” Vlad responded as his green gaze bored into mine. “Do you wish to taste how fine her blood is?”

“Yes, please, a taste,” I responded dreamily.

Vlad covered my mouth with his own then blood began to pour out of him into mine. Sweet, delicious blood, still warm and vital with life. Hungrily, I wrapped my arms around Vlad’s neck, relishing the bloody kisses my Master was granting me. I was only dimly aware of him fumbling with the fastenings of my dress.

Vlad tore his mouth away from my blood lips. “She was very young and so soft in her bed.”

“Yes, yes,” I sighed, licking the blood from my teeth. I could feel this new blood rushing to mingle with my own feast and my vampire body growing stronger. I was dizzy, feverish, delirious and giddy. My head swam as tilted my head back and laughed.

Vlad licked my throat and whispered against it. “She welcomed me into her embrace.” He pulled my dress down around my shoulders.

“She was awed by your power,” I murmured.

“And my need for her life was so great,” Vlad answered, kissing the curve of my bare shoulder.

“She answered to it,” I whispered back.

“I took it. And that of her unborn child.” Vlad trailed kisses down my neck.

I froze, my fingers tightening their grasp on his hair. I wrenched his head back, forcing his mouth from my body. “Repeat what you said.”

Vlad held me firmly to him. “I said, I took the blood of her and her unborn child within her.”

I cried out in horror and flung myself away from him. “You followed me!”

Vlad chuckled mockingly, obviously amused by my distress. “Why did you not take them both, Glynis? What sort of hunter are you?”

“I took what I needed to stave off the hunger. I will not kill unless I am starving and I was not starving,” I shrieked at him. I was irate and overwhelmed with emotion. My hands fidgeted with my dress, trying to pull it up to protect the modesty I no longer truly had.

Vlad smirked. “You are a vampire. We kill mortals. It is our way.”

“Not a woman with child, safe in her bed beside her husband.”

Vlad chuckled and shrugged. “I finished what you started.”

“You killed them! You killed them! An innocent family! You butchered them! Damn you! Damn you!” I flew at him and began to pummel him with my fists. “Will it never end? All this death? Will it?”

Vlad forced me against his body, clutching my wrists tightly. “We are death.

We are the undead. We feed. We kill. You know this.”

I was numb with my horror. The exhilaration of my feeding had dissipated. I felt cold inside and so very, very dead. Tears began to slip from my tormented eyes and Vlad kissed my neck then my lips.

“We are death. You know this.”

“But innocents...”

“Who is truly innocent in the eyes of your God?” He was mocking me and his words stung.

He kissed my mouth again as I tried to free myself from his embrace. “Please no, stop.”

“You were willing before,” Vlad whispered against my lips.

“I was being a fool. Release me.”

“I have no intention of doing so.”

I was shoved down onto the seat as I cried out in anger and frustration. His kisses were searing and his hands slid under my dress caressing me.

Despite myself, I began to grind against his fingers and gasp at his kisses. “Release me,” I growled, but my resolve was faltering.

He drew his tongue up between my breasts, then kissed me deeply. “I shall not.”

Furious at the entire situation and especially myself, I pushed at his broad chest.

His fingers slid over my thighs as he smiled wickedly at me. “Yes?”

“Please, do not let the guards see. Draw the curtains,” I said at last succumbing to him.

Vlad laughed and reached up to do as I asked.

I have realized that if I am to tell my true story, I must be truthful. What gnaws at me, what sometimes strangles my heart, is that in the bed of Vlad Dracula...I am loathe to admit this...I find pleasure. Despite my hatred for him, my anger, and my fear, his touch began to electrify me when I began to go willingly when he summoned me.

At first, I succumbed for the sake of Andrew and the remains of my beloved family. I gritted my teeth and endured it. One night, I found myself responding despite myself and in the aftermath, I felt quite lost in my despair. I could not believe that I had found pleasure with my enemy. Every night thereafter, when he called to me, I went willingly. Every time, I found myself more willing to let him take me.

Alas, as he kissed me and undressed me, I wrapped my arms around him and returned his ardor. We kissed deeply and hungrily as I pressed feverishly against him. His strong hands slid over my body as his lips trailed down my throat, his teeth lightly nipping at my flesh.

Biting my bottom lip, I traced my hands down his back under the thickness of his auburn hair. His bite can deliver the most delicious of pleasure when he wills

it and I trembled with anticipation.

Torn within, as I always am when I feel my body respond to him, I attempted to slip free from him, but he merely sat back and drew me over his body. I could feel his manhood, strong and thick, against my thigh and he gazed up at me with eyes that glowed like fire.

One finger traced my lips as he slowly pulled me down onto him, our bodies joining intimately. I tilted back my head and closed my eyes as I felt him press himself deep into the core of my being. My breasts pressed against his chest, he began to thrust into me, making my body writhe.

Why do I write this? Why do I torment myself? Because I must acknowledge what terrible deeds I have indulged in. I must admit it to myself or go mad.

He caught my hair with his hand and drew my head sharply to one side. I shivered with anticipation as his other hand traced over my breast and I felt his teeth against my throat. Opening my eyes, I could see the paleness of my hand pressed into his dark hair as he slowly bit into my throat.

My fingers tightened into the coils of his hair as he began to force himself deeper into me between my thighs and he drank deeply from me. I swooned in his arms, holding tightly to him as I was overcome with dark pleasures.

As I write this, Vlad's arms are so very cold about me. I am curled beneath a heavy fur throw. Vlad is already asleep. He has drawn the metal coverings. His naked body is wrapped around me and his face is nestled against the back of my neck.

Gazing into the darkness, I cannot help but wonder if I will ever be happy again. Will I ever escape this tyrant who is my lover, my tormentor, my protector? Is it possible that I will someday rule over my own life and make my own decisions whether to kill or not?

Vlad has shifted against me, his arm tightening around my waist. It is as if he senses my discontent.

A tear is lingering on my chin. Already my breasts are wet with my tears, and I have gathered my tresses around me to keep me warm. But I am never truly warm anymore; just varying degrees of cold.

In my mind, a memory of Jonathan Wimberly, the son of one of my father's associates, has drifted to the forefront of my thoughts. He found me crouched behind a hedge during a lively game of hide and seek. Jonathan had promptly fell down beside me as I had giggled with mischievous delight. I could hear the voices of my companions and the sweet music of the insects singing after an afternoon rain. The wet grass beneath me was cold, but when Jonathan suddenly grabbed me and kissed me, I had felt so very warm. It had been my first kiss at the ripe old age of twelve. Jonathan was almost sixteen. I had been so flustered I had not been able to speak at all. He had grinned at me, then dashed away to hide somewhere else. I have never forgotten how, for a mere second, I had felt loved by a boy and had been warmed by his kiss.

Now I am cold inside. When Vlad turns his attentions on me, I have never felt anything akin to love emanating from him; just feral lust, passion and the desire to satiate his own needs. I have often wondered if it mattered if the body beneath him was mine or the vampire sisters or any other woman's. Even now, his arms around me are for his own comfort, not mine.

I cannot help but wonder what it would be like to feel a man's arms around me and know that he loves me. It must be wonderful to love someone and have them love you. But will I ever know that feeling - that lovely illusive feeling?

Chapter 20

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright
9th of March, 1820

We arrived in the city of Buda, Hungary early this evening. The moon shone down on the glistening waves of the Danube as we finally reached our destination. The moon's reflection rippled as the carriage rumbled over the pontoon bridge that joined Buda to its lesser twin city, Pesth.

It is wonderful to return to the last place where I was happy in my mortal life. It was like a wonderful dream had come into glorious reality as the carriage rattled over the cobbled streets, climbing into the hills of the city of Buda where Vlad Dracula's estate is nestled.

Vlad has seemed to visibly relax now that we are in the city and even pointed out historical landmarks to me such as the Royal Palace. I could see the faint outlines of the beautiful building over the tops of the trees and smiled at the sight. It was such an enormous relief to once more be in a modern city.

As the carriage moved down the finest streets of Buda, I felt a thrill of anticipation sweep over me. I am in my own element again. This is a world I understand and can maneuver through. Impulsively, I reached out and grasped Vlad's hand tightly. To my surprise, he leaned toward me to kiss my cheek.

"Tonight you are Countess Dracula. Be proud," he said.

I gazed at him solemnly, feeling the weight of those words. There was a history behind this name that I now carried and it felt like a heavy mantle around me. I nodded then gazed down at the ring glittering on my finger.

Countess Dracula.

How odd it sounds to me, yet that is my title. We are married by blood. That much is true. But it is not a sacred union and that in its own strange way is a solace to me.

At last, the carriage turned past a huge gate that opened upon a lane guarded over by tall pines. The road curved and when the carriage swept around trees, I saw the lights of the great Hungarian mansion. It was so beautiful and such a vast difference from the wretched castle that we had traveled from, I felt tears

rise spring to my eyes.

The front doors opened as the carriage approached and servants dressed in fine uniforms hurried out. A tall, awkward form followed them out of the lighted doorway and I drew in my breath sharply.

With a quick pull of the reins and a sharp bark at the horses, the driver brought the carriage to a rocking stop. There was a quick scrambling of men, one opening the door, the others pulling down the luggage, several others calming the weary horses. Vlad exited first and motioned for me to wait.

My eyes were still steadfastly resting on the man standing nervously on the steps of the house. It was Sir Stephen: the traitorous, murdering bastard. I felt my teeth sliding downward as I hungered for his blood.

“Sir Stephen, my dear friend,” Vlad called out in greeting.

Stephen rushed down the stairs. “Count Dracula, my Master, it is so very good to see you. I was worried that you had been delayed. I received word that the English gentleman is two days away from the city and I was most anxious for you to arrive.”

I watched as Stephen’s gaze flicked nervously toward the carriage. I knew I was embraced by darkness and that he could not see me. I enjoyed his anxious glances in my direction.

“We have arrived safely and in good time,” Vlad said smoothly. “Now, my dear friend and loyal servant, I wish for you to meet my new bride, Countess Dracula.”

Vlad extended his hand to me. I reached out of the darkness and placed my hand in his. Gently, he helped me from the carriage. I was satisfied when Sir Stephen gasped at the sight of me. I am sure I was a far cry from the beautiful deadly creature that had beckoned to him with my siren’s call. Dressed elegantly, my hair fashionably arranged beneath my feathered bonnet, I looked every bit the fine aristocratic lady I was before his betrayal. But my gaze felt dangerous even to me and he shrank beneath it.

Vlad waited for the dumbstruck solicitor to greet me, but when he failed to do anymore than gawk at me, Vlad pushed him forward gruffly. “Greet my wife, Stephen,” he said testily.

Stephen snapped out of his reverie and moved forward hastily. “Countess Dracula, it is a pleasure.”

My eyes sly and deadly, I extended my hand to him.

Beads of perspiration popped out on his brow as he nervously took my gloved hand and leaned down to kiss it.

I let out a low, hardly audible growl.

Stephen jerked back so quickly he lost his balance and fell to the ground.

Vlad gave me a sharp warning glance, then leaned down to help the man to his feet.

“My wife can be overwhelming,” Vlad said, slightly smiling.

I realized he was amused.

“Yes, very,” Stephen responded breathlessly.

When Vlad led me into the house, I cried out in delight. It was beautiful and modern. Fine furniture, lush draperies, and exotic carpets adorned every room. Forgetting my manners, I rushed from room to glorious room in a frenzied tour. Vlad let me be and disappeared into a study to talk with the still very wary Sir Stephen.

After plunging through the house, I flung open one last door and found myself in the most exquisite modern bedroom. It was completely decorated in white and gold. Gazing up at the crystal chandelier, I began to laugh as I whirled about. I stumbled and landed on the bed and stared up at the silk canopy above me. It was almost like coming home.

A maid entered the room followed by several footmen. “Over there,” she ordered, and my traveling trunks were set down.

“I shall begin to unpack immediately, ma’am,” she said in her precise enunciation. She was obviously Hungarian but she spoke English flawlessly.

“Thank you, err...”

“Magda, ma’am” the maid responded.

I sighed with sheer delight, smiling at her. “Magda, it is wonderful to see you.” Finally! A decent servant. No gypsies lurked in the shadows in this fine home.

The brilliant shimmering of the light outside my windows lured me onto the balcony. The evening greeted me with the gentle kiss of the night breeze and the soft whisper of the trees swaying in the wind. Leaning against the cold white marble railing, I gazed out past my balcony at the cool waters of the Danube flowing lazily past the lush lawn below. A night bird called out to me and I lifted my head.

With awe, I found that I was blissfully happy.

Later -

Vlad summoned me to his side a few hours after our arrival. I supervised the unpacking of my trunks and had luxuriated in the wonder of being a mistress of my own household. I was in such a lovely mood that when he called for me, I went without hesitation.

“The servants know what we truly are,” he explained when I joined him. “I pay them well for their service to me. Most of their families have served me for centuries. They know better than to defy me. We are safe here.”

We were standing in the foyer of the house, and I tilted to my head to gaze at him. “Have vampire hunters found the house previously? You spoke of precautions.”

“No, but just in case, I had this built for us.”

Vlad turned into an alcove at the base of the stairs and motioned for me to

follow him. He slipped easily through a small crack in the wall that was hidden in the shadows of a corner.

I took a deep breath and let my power rise up within me. I felt myself drifting as I slipped through the slim passage between the bricks making up the wall. I found myself standing in a small room draped in red velvet. A bed was centered in the room and candles lined the walls.

“If the hunters come, this is where we will retreat. Another room exactly like this one is being built above us. There is no way for a mortal man to enter. There are no doors, no windows. These walls surrounding us are four feet thick. Even if they try and burn us out, they will not reach us within this room.” Vlad sat down on the bed and smiled with satisfaction. “I am prepared. Let them come.”

I glanced about the small room and sighed rather dramatically. “It is so very much like a tomb.”

“We are vampires.”

“Must we always remind ourselves of that fact?” I stomped my foot at him irritably. I turned and slipped through the wall into the foyer.

It was so much more comforting in the house than that horrible little room.

Sir Stephen rounded the corner, a sheaf of papers in hand. He caught sight of me and froze. “Lady Glynis! I mean...rather...Countess Dracula, how may I be of service.”

I smiled at him coyly. “Sir Stephen, how nice to see the lying bastard who condemned my family to death,” I said in very polite tones. I gave him my brightest smile. I was bemused when he staggered back at the sight of my teeth.

“That is enough,” Vlad said as he appeared. “Glynis, you cannot harm Sir Stephen. I forbid it.”

“So, if I cannot harm him, may I kill him?” I asked innocently. “I promise it will not hurt too much.”

Vlad could not help but chuckle as Sir Stephen staggered back, growing very pale. He was so white from fear, he looked like a ghost already.

“No, my darling wife. Though it would amuse me to see you torture him to death, he is a faithful servant and your are forbidden from hurting or killing him.”

“Oh, bother,” I said with a pout. I placidly began to walk away, but as I passed Sir Stephen, I hissed at him and laughed when he jumped.

Ah, diary, I love it here.

Excerpt of a letter to Angelina Wright from Andrew Wright
7th of March, 1820

...we have secured a carriage that will carry us to Buda.

I feel such a fiery anticipation eating away at me as we enter the final stages of this long and terrible trip. Between the bad weather at sea and the constant struggle to keep from absolute despair, I am quite weary. My only solace is that

you are safely at home and I shall soon see my sister.

I fear that I shall not be able to endure to see what fate has befallen her. I have no peace.

Oh, dearest wife, pray for me. I feel as though I am entering the Valley of the Shadow of Death...

Chapter 21

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

10th of March, 1820

The Dracula Estate

Buda, Hungary

Soon after arriving in Buda, Vlad had sent for his dressmaker in order to have special veils made to cover my ethereal beauty from my brother. I am completely frustrated with the heavy bothersome things, but Vlad is quite vehement in his orders that I should wear a veil at all times when around Andrew.

Therefore, earlier this evening, I fussed with the veil over my face finding myself quite irritated. Andrew is expected in another night and I can hardly wait to see him. But as I tried to maneuver in that damned veil, I realized I will not truly see him through all the organza and lace.

With an explosive hiss, I ripped the lacy irritant from my face and flung it onto the bed. Stomping across the room, I flung myself into a chair and glared at the cluttered bed.

It felt wonderful to be an awful brat of a girl once more. I loved being fussed over and complimented by the dressmaker and his assistant. It had felt so normal, so wonderfully normal. Already the castle and my vampire sisters seem like ancient history.

But the veils...I hate them. Despise them!

I wanted to shred them to pieces.

The door to my bedroom swung open and Vlad appeared dressed immaculately in black. His hair and mustache were trimmed stylishly. "I am going out for the evening."

"To visit whores?"

Vlad laughed at my impertinence. "Ladies of the night is what they are called, dear. So appropriate, is it not? I am going with Sir Stephen and will not be home until it is nearly dawn."

"Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die," I said flippantly.

"Jealous, wife?" Vlad asked, his eyes narrowing.

"No, not at all. Better them than me."

Vlad laughed lightly, lifting a veil from the bed. "You will wear these."

“I know,” I answered blandly. I would not argue with him on this point. Andrew’s safety meant too much to me.

Vlad turned to study me as I slumped in the chair looking very much the brat that I am. “You are free for the night, my wife. I will not hold you here. Go out and see the city. Hunt to your heart’s content. Seduce as many young men in their beds as you please. Just be home before dawn or you will burn in the sun.” Vlad hesitated, then said, “I would very much not like that to happen.”

“Because of your plans to move to England,” I said.

“Yes, of course” Vlad fastidiously plucked a bit of lint from his jacket then smiled at me. “Good night, wife.”

The door shut behind him and my expression changed from one of indifference to one of joy. I leapt across my room and began to ransack my closet for a fine dress and cloak to wear out into the night. I rang for the maid as I began to strip off my dress while somehow managing to dance about.

Magda entered her expression blank and ready to obey. “Yes, ma’am?”

“Have the stableman hitch up the caleche for me and wake up that young driver.”

Magda bowed and immediately hurried away.

Once dressed in a lovely emerald dress with a black cloak tossed over my shoulders, I hurried down to my waiting caleche. It is the sweetest little thing, with an open top. The driver hurriedly helped me up into the carriage and clambered up onto his own seat. Then we were off down the curving drive.

“Where shall I take you, ma’am?” the driver asked.

“Into the heart of the city,” I responded.

The beautiful black horses trotted over the cobblestones streets, tossing their manes proudly as they pulled along my tiny carriage. The stars were brilliant above me and a luminous moon bathed the city with its unearthly glow. The caleche rolled sedately through the night past imposing churches with tall, sharp spires and elegant homes tucked into the sides of the hills, finding its way down the lanes lined with oak tress.

I sat in contented silence gazing out at the city where my family had spent their last happy days. I could almost imagine that the carriage was taking me back to Sir Stephen’s stately home and that I would find my family gathered in the parlor waiting for me.

But that was merely a dream.

I could feel the difference in not only myself but in the night. I was acutely aware of my surroundings, the shadows slithering along the walls, the thick gloom pooling in the trees, and the many nocturnal creatures slipping through the darkness. The night was alive with music. The music of nature. I could easily sort through the cacophony of sounds that drifted through the night: the sighing of the wind, the creaking of the tree limbs, animals scurrying about through the underbrush, a drunken man falling into a bush, the cries of a baby in the house

we passed.

The horses trotted haughtily along the edge of the Danube. I leaned forward to gaze out at the dark waters. How beautifully the moonbeams danced on the waters, merrily skipping over the waves. I smiled to myself and sighed with bittersweet contentment.

May and I had picnicked on the shores of the Danube with some young Hungarian aristocrats soon after our arrival in Buda. It had been a glorious day full of sunshine and laughter.

The driver turned the caleche onto the pontoon bridge and soon we were in the city of Pesth that lay across the river from Buda. It was the poorer, more thickly populated area of the two cities. The laughter and drunken singing of those still prowling the night began to drift on the wind and a feral smile spread on my ruby lips.

“Driver, leave me here,” I ordered.

“It is not such a safe place, ma’am,” the driver cautioned me.

“I am not such a safe lady, driver,” I responded with a sly smile.

The predator within me was alive and hungry. My eyes were glittering and I could feel the sharpness of my gaze as I looked upon him. The blood lust was beginning to rise within me and the mere thought of the hunt was making my body tingle with anticipation.

I let myself down from the caleche and turned to peer up into the anxious face of the young driver. His eyes were such a lovely shade of green. They reminded me of spring when the trees are in full bloom and the English countryside is a lush paradise. As I smiled up at him, I felt my long teeth slowly edge downward. Fear blossomed in his beautiful gaze. I not only saw, but also felt the tensing of his body. Prey is always frightened in the presence of a predator.

“Listen carefully, driver,” I said gently, trying to look as non-threatening as possible. “I want you to go somewhere safe, where you will not have to worry about being accosted. An hour before dawn, return here for me. I will be waiting. Understand?”

“Yes, ma’am. I will return here,” the driver promised fervently.

“Then be off with you!”

I waved my hands at the horses and they immediately swung about, disappearing into the night.

Whirling about, I stared down the darkened street lined with taverns. This was good hunting ground. Several men drunkenly stumbled out of the shadows, singing enthusiastically at the top of their lungs. The funny thing was that each one was singing a different song. As they neared me, they abruptly stopped their off-key chorus and stared at me stupidly.

“A fine young lady such as yourself should not be here,” one of them managed to slur after a moment. From the lascivious look in his eyes, I could vividly see his point. But I am no ordinary young lady.

“Someone as smelly and drunk as you should not be speaking to a young lady such as myself,” I retorted flippantly.

With a grin, the man swaggered out of the grasp of his comrades and broadly smiled at me. He could have been handsome if he were not missing so many teeth. “I would love to escort the young lady back to her home.”

I laughed, tossing my head. “Really? Well, I would rather that you did not. Now why do you not go home before something very wicked happens to you.”

“Leave her alone, Bela,” one of the other men said shortly.

Bela just smiled, reaching out his grimy hand to me. “Come on. Let me take you home.”

I was tired of this game and stomped my foot indignantly. “Leave now or you will regret it!”

“I bet your father would pay a nice sum if I return you safety to him,” Bela decided. He pondered this thought, then began to nod vigorously. “Yes, I’m sure of it.”

Bela made an off-balance grab for my arm. When I jerked away, he teetered on his toes, his arms flailing. He nearly toppled over, but managed to straighten himself. Focusing on me, the inebriated man once more attempted to take hold of me.

Enough was enough.

I caught his arm as he lunged toward me and swiveled about, dragging him into a wide arc. As his body gained momentum, I released him. He flew through the air, arms and legs pumping in vain. He landed with a resounding crash in a pile of refuse.

Satisfied, I whirled about, wiped my hands on my cloak, and continued my stroll down the street. I could not help but be vaguely amused by the shocked exclamations being uttered by the drunks as they helped Bela to his feet.

Past all sorts of hideous, yet intriguing places, I strolled along in contented silence. I felt the full extent of my power over this mundane world and I relished in it. Nothing could truly touch me or hurt me. I stood atop the mortal world, untouchable and content. I was nearly drunk with the thought of my power.

As I journeyed on, I pushed through crowds gathered around brawlers, sidestepped drunkards passed out on the road, nodded my head to barely clothed women seductively luring men off the streets into their bordellos, and smiled at small children trying to hawk tobacco.

“Should you not be home in bed?” I asked one particularly dirty little boy.

“How much do you cost?” he responded, his blue eyes taking in my velvet cloak and fine dress. “You look expensive.”

“You could never afford me,” I answered glibly.

“I have a bit saved up,” the boy assured me. His dark eyebrows lifted on his dirty face as he gave me a devastatingly irresistible, yet cocky smile.

I was charmed by the boy and could not help but smile down at him. “Why

do you not buy food with that money instead?"

"You are much more interesting," he responded with a smirk.

The boy was probably no older than twelve. I was not sure if it was my vampire beauty or his blossoming manhood that was obviously provoking the boy's interest in me. I was amused by his flagrant flirtation, but a little saddened by it. This was not a child, but a small man trapped in a young boy's body. The bruises on his face told of beatings and there was hollowness in his eyes that spoke of hardship.

"Here," I said, fishing a coin out of my purse. "Buy a loaf of bread and go home."

The boy took the coin with a weary sigh. "Then you reject me?"

"You are far too young," I chided him. "Your mother is probably worried about you. Rush on home."

"She is busy working." He jerked his head toward the nearest bordello.

"Oh," was all I could manage. I dropped another coin into his grubby hand and tenderly patted his matted hair.

With one last smile, I began to prowl through the streets of Buda. I felt the pangs of the hunger, but I had yet to find anyone that looked appealing to me. I was not yet starving, so I could be very picky about my victim. Everyone was far too dirty, too drunk, or just too ornery to suit me. I desired young, fresh blood, full of life: not blood stale and thin from a weary life.

The streets became quieter as I moved along and soon I was lost in the maze of streets and buildings. It was here that many of the poorer inhabitants of Pesth slumbered in their beds in the shadow of the more illustrious Buda. I began to consider calling out and seeing which window opened. Time was quickly ticking away. I would soon have to return to Buda and the mansion.

A strangled scream broke me out of my contemplation.

Startled, I whirled about, my heavy skirt swishing around my ankles. My eyes glowed with dark fires as I gazed around me, peering into the darkness, examining every shadow.

Sly laughter drifted languidly on the night breeze.

Another vampire!

I was running before I could even finish the thought. Hands clutching my heavy skirts up around my knees, I dashed down the street and around the nearest corner. It was there I came to an abrupt halt.

In the shadows, a man was lying on the ground, a woman leaning over him. Her long blond hair fell in a wild disarray of unfettered curls covering her face. Deep, urgent growls uttered forth from her throat as she gnawed at the fallen man's throat. The hands gripping the man's head were dark with dirt and her nails were black and broken. The dark blue dress she wore was torn at the seams and frayed around the hem.

I could only stare in fascination as the rumpled creature tore at the man,

grunting with the dark desire of the hunger.

Quite suddenly the other vampire sensed that someone was near, and her head snapped up. Eyes glowing like the fires of Hades, her gaze swept over the street and finally came to rest on me. A harsh growl uttered forth from her throat.

“Please, I do not wish to—” I began to say softly, but a commotion nearby shut off my words.

“Over here!”

It was a man’s voice that shouted, breaking the silence of the night.

I automatically slunk backwards into a doorway and enshrouded myself in the shadows.

The vampire whirled about on her hands and knees just as several young men elegantly dressed in fine black suits raced into the street. They took in the ghastly scene before them with horrified expressions and several crossed themselves.

“She attacked Richard,” shouted a young man with fiery red hair.

He had an accent I did not recognize.

It took a mere moment for me to realize that the men did not seem shocked by the scene before them. In fact, they seemed extremely excited by the whole situation. Several were actually smiling. Only the red haired man seemed to show any remorse at all over witnessing the death of his comrade.

I realized then that they were vampire hunters.

I immediately shrank further into the darkness.

The vampire hissed wildly as the men advanced on her. Scrambling backwards, she perched atop her victim and growled menacingly at the vampire hunter. Without hesitation, one of the men pulled a huge cross from his overcoat and she shrieked in horror.

“Run,” I whispered fervently. “Run!”

The vampire did not run. She leapt. With a scream, she flung herself upwards, sailing over the heads of the men. Her bare feet hit the cold stones and she was off, running like the crazed vampire she truly was. She was one of those the madness had never left.

There were six vampire hunters and five ran after the vampire. I kept waiting for the creature to leap into the night sky and fly off, but instead she ran, barely keeping ahead of the hunters. The last hunter, the one with the fiery hair and the strange accent, knelt over his fallen comrade. He doused him with Holy Water and began to pray.

I fidgeted. Either I had to wait in the shadows and slip away when the hunter left or pursue the vampire to attempt to help her and risk exposure. I hesitated, then made my decision. Hiking up my skirts, I rushed into the street and ran after the vampire hunters.

As my cloak brushed past the vampire hunter kneeling at the fallen man’s side, he whirled about on his knees in surprise.

“Madam! Madam! Do not follow! You must not follow! It is dangerous! Let us take care of the situation,” he called out anxiously.

I ignored him, running faster. My soft shoes padded against the ground as I ran and my cloak fluttered behind me like great wings. I was not as quick as I would have been if I had fed, and my strength was diminished. Dredging up every ounce of my power, I forced myself to move faster.

The mad vampire fled in a wild, frenzied state of mind. Blindly she ran, falling over holes in the road, slamming into walls as she attempted to turn corners, and tripping over thin air. Her muddled mind obviously could not reason. It was inevitable that the five hunters behind her finally managed to outwit her. They forced her into a narrow alley that had no exit. Together, the five hunters advanced on her, blocking her escape, torches held high over their heads.

One hunter, an Eastern Orthodox priest, held a huge crucifix in his hands, and the flickering torchlight illuminated its golden beauty.

The vampire shrieked in rage and fear, her features distorted in the flickering light of the torches. My eyes burned at the sight of the cross and I tried not to look upon it as I drew back, merging with the shadows. I braced myself against a wall, my mind spinning out half formed plans of escape for both of us.

The priest began to chant as he advanced and the other men drew forward to encircle the vampire, forcing her back against the far wall. Tears tinged with blood were running down her cheeks, washing away the filth and revealing her luminescent flesh. She was beautiful and desolate. My heart broke for her and a sob caught in my throat.

“Do not gaze into her eyes,” a man with a heavy French accent ordered.

The priest’s chanting rose in pitch and fervor. I felt my flesh crawl at the sound. They were going to kill the vampire right before me and I could not bear it. The vampire was mad with the hunger, a condition I understood all too well. It was obvious to me that the vampire was confused and certainly not rational enough to defend herself or deliver herself unto safety.

A vampire hunter with pale blue eyes and blond hair knelt down and opened a case he was carrying. The torchlight glimmered off the fierce knife within.

”Franco, here,” he called out in quick, precise tones. He sounded Scandinavian. The hunter drew out a stake and handed it to a short, stout Spanish man that stepped to his side. “The duty is yours to perform.”

“I am honored, Svend,” Franco said reverently.

“The killing blow will be administered by Gilchrist,” Svend continued.

A lanky young man with black hair stepped forward nervously. “It is an honor.” I recognized his Gaelic accent immediately.

Svend lifted a mallet from the bag and presented it to the young man. “This is your first kill. You must be strong and strike down this demon of the pit.”

“I understand and will not flinch in my duty,” Gilchrist stammered,

swallowing hard.

“I will finish what needs to be done,” Svend continued, and for himself, he took out an ugly knife with a long wicked blade.

The priest’s voice rose up as the hunters selected for the kill moved to the forefront of the pack.

“Prepare, Arminius, to deliver her soul from this world,” Svend said softly to the priest.

I could take no more.

“Murderers!” I leaped from the shadows before I realized what I was doing, my indignation spurring me to action.

The vampire hunters whirled about, startled expressions on their faces.

“Murdering bastards,” I raged, baring my teeth, which was probably not the brightest thing I have ever done.

“Another bride of the devil,” Svend shouted.

“Abraham, kill her,” Franco called out, not to his comrades but to someone behind me.

I heard footsteps and whirled about. The vampire hunter who had stayed behind was bearing down on me, a stake raised high above his head.

I was too shocked to react and recoiled in terror. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a shadow suddenly break free from a patch of night and coalesce into the dark shape of a man. The hunter was almost upon me, his expression determined, the stake above him beginning to sweep downward.

“You would not dare,” I said imperiously to the hunter, preparing to slap the stake away.

Instead, my feet left the ground and the wind howled in my ears. Below me, the vampire hunter fell forward, carried by his momentum, the stake he meant for my heart clattering away on the road. I saw the upturned faces of the men below me, then I was dropped unceremoniously onto a peaked rooftop.

I immediately scrambled to my feet and whirled about. I found myself face to face with the most extraordinary man. Tall and slender, clad all in black, he stood before me as majestic and beautiful as the very night. It was as if a fragment of the night sky had broken free of the heavenly firmament, fell to earth and coalesced into this glorious being. Hair black and straight as raven feathers fell down around a face as pale and luminous as the moon. His long, narrow face was a fine combination of sharp angles and soft lines. Dark brows were drawn downward over piercing eyes the color of the midnight sky. Sensuous lips, full and seductive, were drawn into a tight line and it took me a long moment to realize that this mysterious vampire was quite furious with me.

“Exactly what, pray tell, were you doing down there?” he finally said in a soft, but strong voice.

I was taken aback with his tone, so I just stared at him in shock. I could not believe I was in the presence of another vampire!

“There were two more! I saw them,” the voice of the Spanish hunter drifted up to them.

“I saw only the woman,” Svend responded, his voice harsh with anger. “And she escaped!”

“There was a man! I swear it!”

“I saw only a blur of the shadows, Abraham, and then she was gone.”

The desperate voices of the vampire hunters rose into the night.

My rescuer raised an eyebrow. “Satisfied? You exposed us both.”

I opened my mouth to respond but could not think of what to say, so I clamped it shut and stomped my foot.

“Damn vampire hunters. Will they ever let us be?” He brushed past me and dared a glance downward.

I stood transfixed, staring at him, yet trying not to. This beautiful man with his long black hair stole my breath utterly away. He was the most magnificent man I had ever seen and I could only gape at him. There was a power flowing about him in great waves that shook me to the very core of my being. I was overwhelmed by his presence.

“It is the end for her, poor girl,” he whispered softly.

I moved to his side and raised my eyes to gaze upon his face. His skin was so pale and smooth that I had this rash desire touch him. The wind whipped his long, black hair about his face, but he took no notice. His gaze was concentrated on the drama below, his dark eyes full of frustration and pity.

A scream drew my attention downward and away from my savior.

The hunters were done discussing the other vampires they had seen and were once more concentrating on the poor creature cowering before them. Slowly, they advanced on the disheveled creature, crosses extended before them. The priest, Arminius, took up his chant again. The vampire screamed in horror and pain. She sank to her knees, her hands held out before her in a futile attempt to shield herself. The priest lunged forward to wave his cross threateningly at her as his voice rose in a rush of indecipherable words.

Groaning miserably, she clawed at the ground. The hunters had now closed within two feet of her and she darted at the weakest point of their line. A shriek of pain was torn from her throat and she fell back, her hands and arms scarred with blisters from the where the hunters had pressed their crosses against her skin.

“Bastards,” my companion muttered under his breath.

A vampire hunter moved forward and threw Holy Water into the vampire’s face. She cried out agony as her face began to melt away.

I grabbed hold of the male vampire’s arm with a trembling hand. His long smooth hand closed over mine. “Can we not help her?”

He looked down at me, shaking his head. “She is mad and we must not expose ourselves further. We must think of our own safety.”

Below, the vampire fell to the ground, quivering with pain and fear. We lost view of her as the hunters closed in tightly around her. I watched as the Gaelic hunter named Gilchrist moved closer to where the vampire huddled on the ground. Franco disappeared as he knelt down and my fingers dug into the fine silk of my companion's coat.

Gilchrist lifted up his long arm and the mallet fell downward. A piercing, agonizing scream broke forth. Gilchrist lifted the mallet and brought it down one more time. There was no scream, just a soft whimper.

Svend, his pale face flushed with excitement, moved forward and I saw the blade streak downward.

"It is finished," the male vampire whispered.

Svend raised the decapitated head of the vampire over his head in triumph, his fingers gripping her long matted tresses. The fresh blood drizzled from her severed head onto his pale blond hair, but he seemed to take no notice.

The hunters broke into cheers.

Chapter 22

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright-Continued

I was so overcome, I could not even move. Tears flowed freely and my lips trembled with emotion. The vampire gently took hold of my arm and pulled me away from the ghastly view. His hands were smooth and comforting against my face as he wiped my tears away.

"There, there, do not cry," he said soothingly.

His words only made me sob all the more. His gentleness reminded me of my own poor dead father.

"Was she your sister?"

I shook my head. "No, no. I had never seen her before tonight. I have only arrived in Buda. I saw her just before those...those...bestly men...they...how could they? How could they do that to her? How?" I fell against him, burying my face in his shoulder. I felt his arms go around me and he held me tightly against him.

"Do not be afraid. They cannot reach us here. We just need to be wise in our endeavors. They know about us now and will be searching for us," he said softly against my hair.

I nodded dismally. It had been horrifying to see another vampire destroyed. It was as if I had witnessed my own death.

The gentleman vampire smoothed back my curls from my face, rocking me gently in his arms. "It shall be well once more," he promised me.

The trembling of my body stilled as I felt an unexpected peaceful calm settling over me. Something wondrous began to happen. I felt a pleasant

warmth spreading through me. It seemed to seep out of the very depths of my soul and flow through my veins. The fear and pain of the death I had witnessed fell away from my mind as all I could feel was the tender embrace of the vampire. The strong arms around me were so comforting, so wonderfully comforting.

Slowly, I became aware of the hard, lean muscles of the vampire's body beneath his clothing as it pressed against me. Desire, bright and delicious began to blossom within me. His long silky hair fell over my brow and into my eyes. His warm breath caressed my face as gentle as any kiss. I luxuriated in his powerful embrace and wished it to never end.

"Who is your Master? I shall take you to your Master, if you wish it," the man said, his voice breaking through my repose.

I started, nearly drawing away. I could not tell this vampire of Vlad or our home! Vlad would beat me without mercy if a male vampire returned to me to the safety of the mansion. I knew he would be venomously jealous. I just knew it with every fiber of my being. There was absolutely no way I could allow this vampire to endanger us both by returning me to Vlad.

"Your Master should know you might be in danger. You did a very foolish thing rushing after that girl in front of the hunters," the vampire chided me.

My pride rose and, indignantly, I pulled away. Haughtily, I raised my chin. "I was protecting one of our own. You did nothing to save her, may I remind you."

The vampire laughed. "You are a very arrogant young woman, are you not?" He was clearly amused by my outburst.

"You are a patronizing bastard," I retorted.

"From weeping child to petulant child...interesting."

I frowned at him. "I am never a weeping child. Perhaps petulant. But I was trying to help her! I was just not quite certain how to accomplish my task. And you did nothing to help me, so therefore, do not condescend to me and say that I am a rash woman, for I can assure you, I am not." I stomped my foot for emphasis and his smile broadened.

"Very well, madam, I stand corrected," he said with a small bow.

"And I am not a madam. I am a lady. And a master of my own fate."

"Are you? For I fear if you are the Master of your own fate, you shall not last long rushing headlong into the presence of hunters," he observed.

I scoffed at him, turning my nose up at him. "They are merely mortal men."

"Who know how to wield weapons against us that render us helpless before them if we are not careful," he answered me calmly.

I frowned, then slightly nodded, realizing the truth of his words. I felt my defenses slip for a moment. I was drawn to the vampire. As I stood near him, I could feel his presence wrapping around me and it made me feel foolish and weak. When I gazed upon him, all I could think of was my desire to once more

feel the strength of his embrace.

“You were foolish,” he said firmly, but with his bemused smile. “You had best think before rushing into a situation like that again.”

I turned sharply on my heel toward him and pointed a finger at him. “You, sir, do not know a thing about me. I am very strong and clever. I was about to escape their clutches when you interfered.”

I am not truly certain I would have escaped had he not come to my rescue, but I was not about to admit to such a thing. I do have my pride, as misplaced as it can be at times, and I was loathe to admit weakness.

“I am sure you are correct, my lady. It was my error to think otherwise,” he said in such a way I was not sure if he was mocking me or not. “Now, who is your Master?”

“I am certainly not telling you. It is none of your business. Besides, maybe I have no Master. Maybe the vampire hunters killed him.” I sniffed, adjusting my cloak. “Maybe I am my own Master.”

He shook his head. “Very well, I shall not pursue this question further.” He glanced skywards, then back toward me. “The sun shall rise in a few hours. I suggest you feed and return to your haven.” He hesitated, then said with charming sarcasm. “You can, of course, return home without alerting every hunter in the city of your presence?”

I gave him a sharp look and stomped my foot. “I can assure you that I am quite capable in protecting myself and returning home safely.”

He tucked his hands behind his back and regarded me somberly. “You do realize the seriousness of the hunters knowing of your existence.”

“Of course, I do. I am, despite my feminine nature, a creature of some intelligence.”

To my surprise, he reached out and lay one hand gently against my flushed cheek. His fine fingers slid over my flesh, tantalizing and cool. I felt mesmerized by his touch and raised my chin to gaze into his eyes.

“I am sure you are quite cunning and used to using your feminine wiles to fine effect, but you must be safe. I can see by your nature, that you are not a creature of caution.”

Gazing up at him through my lashes, I smiled slightly. “No, perhaps not, but I can assure you, I shall never burn in the sun or meet an untimely death at the hands of a hunter.” I was doing my best to be beguiling and defiant. I was very attracted to this vampire and being so near to him made me want touch him.

To my surprise, his gaze darkened at my words and he said quite softly, “One so young should never promise something so foolish.” His hand caressed my cheek gently and the sadness that I had awakened in his eyes drew me in and made me shiver.

Drawing his hand from my cheek, I held it against my breast and looked upon him with a chastised and sorrowful expression. “Forgive me, sir. I did not mean

to upset you.”

And that is when he kissed me.

The world beyond us ceased to exist. In that intense passionate instant, I felt overcome with a power so great I could scarcely stand. It was as if the sun had exploded, engulfing us in liquid fire, and fusing us together.

He drew back and looked down at me with an expression I dare not attempt to describe. Turning his back on me, he said, “You will get home safely?”

“Well, yes,” I answered, feeling very confused. “Yes, of course.”

“Very well,” the vampire said. He began to walk away over the tall peaks of the rooftops; his long coat fluttering around him as his hair flowed on the wind.

“Wait, wait!” I stumbled after him. “My name is Lady Glynis Wright. Who are you?”

He turned back to gaze upon me. I could feel his desire to return to me, but he fought it, a bitter sweetness tingeing his features.

“Lady Glynis, it does not matter,” he answered, then the night seemed to enfold him and he was gone.

“No, you cannot merely leave and not let me know your name. You kissed me, sir! I deserve to know your name.”

But there was no response.

He was gone.

Needless to say, I was quite upset. Never had I been kissed in such a fashion that I forgot the entire world around me save the man holding me close. Never had I felt such intense passion. Had he not felt the intense emotional surge that had encompassed us when he had kissed me? Did he not know that in those few short moments he had made me love him?

Oh, how I yearned to see him again! To touch him again! To feel his kiss once more!

My girlish infatuation with Lord Byron dimmed in comparison to what I now felt.

And I did not even know his name.

Hungry, weary, and furious, I stomped across the peaked roof, feeling quite put out. How could he kiss me then leave?

Tugging my hood over my head, I stormed across the rooftops of the houses of Pesth. Finally, I dropped into the street and walked toward the caleche. It was just where it was supposed to be. The driver appeared to be asleep, fallen over in his seat.

“Let us go now,” I said.

He did not stir.

Frustrated, I shook him and he fell over. His eyes were wide and staring. His throat was slit from ear to ear.

I felt my skin begin to prickle. I whirled about, sensing the swirl of power nearby. This was no ordinary murder. No criminal had taken the driver’s life to

steal his money.

My teeth slid downward as I felt my eyes burn as my gaze sharpened. Someone or something was nearby and it was watching me.

I sank back from the carriage, pushing up the shadows around me, drawing my powers up around me as protection. Instinctively, I knew that whatever was watching me, was now aware that I knew it was there.

Before me, the shadows gave birth to a tall, wiry man. His countenance was very, very pale, albino apparently, with white hair and eyes as pale as frozen water. Dressed all in black, he was an imposing figure. His gaunt face seemed to hover in the darkness around him. He felt like great power, but not quite vampire, not quite mortal.

He bowed deeply. "Good evening, madam. Let me introduce myself. I am Gregor. I am a dhampir and it is my greatest pleasure to bring your Satanic existence to an end tonight."

I raised my chin, my eyes widening as I gazed at him. "I do not know what you are, but I can assure you I am not Satanic."

"Really? Are you not a vampire?" He smiled at me, flashing, to my surprise, sharp little fangs. "Your kind gave birth to my kind. I can smell you, feel you, like a pulse in my head."

I drew myself up and tried to look as aristocratic and imposing as possible. "Be gone with you."

He threw back his head and laughed, then cut the laughter off as he fastened his deadly gaze on me. "No."

It was then that I saw the tiny silver daggers tucked into the sleeves of his long black coat. He raised one hand, his long fingers twitching over one.

"Come now, devil's bride, the time of your salvation draws near," Gregor said with a taunting smile.

I turned and ran.

"I do so enjoy it when your kind runs. It makes the hunt that much more exciting," his voice taunted on the night wind.

I dashed down the road, my feet barely touching the ground. Frantic to escape, I tried to pull my power up, but found it waning. I had yet to feed and my power was diminished.

His feet were light on the road behind me and I could hear him easily pacing me. I reached the bridge that crossed the Danube to Buda and glanced back over my shoulder to see him drawing near.

Drawing his arm back, I saw the glint of silver. I ducked away as the dagger whistled through the air and impacted with the ground in front of me. He flung another dagger at me and I fell to the ground. Keeping my eyes on the assassin, I scrambled backwards like a spider. Drawing on my waning power, I drew the night around me like a cloak, rendering myself invisible to all that would gaze in my direction.

Gregor dropped onto the ground as I vanished from his sight. Crouching low, he began to slowly advance on where I had been. A dagger clutched in each hand, sweeping his arms about, his eyes sparkled with lethal intensity as he sought me out.

I backed away quickly, on my toes and fingertips. I could not seem to get enough distance between the dhamphir and myself. He seemed to instinctively follow in my wake. Suddenly, he jabbed out at me. I leaped back, flipped over, and landed in a flurry of skirts. He was right before me, crouched. I kicked him so hard, his head audibly snapped back.

Turning, I ran across the bridge, desperate, terrified, and calling forth every bit of power I had left. At last, I felt it filling me so I threw out my arms and soared upwards.

The wind embraced me, lifting me higher, my skirts fluttering about my feet. Feeling a great sense of relief, I drew my cloak around me and glided toward the estate where Vlad and I had made our new home.

“I know you are there,” came a mocking voice from behind me.

I twisted about to see the dhamphir hovering in the air, his long coat fluttering around him. Slowly he raked his gaze over the panoramic vista this high altitude afforded us.

He began to fly in wide swoops like some hellish demon, laughing malevolently. “I may not see you, but I can sense you, little vampire.”

I turned and flew as swiftly as I could.

“Come here, little vampire,” he sing-songed behind me as he flew in circles.

I panicked and twisted about, trying to find him. I slammed into the spire of a huge church and dug my long nails into the stone in desperation. Every attempt I made to elude the dangerous assassin had failed thus far. Gregor was cunning and he was merciless in his pursuit. His lean body sluiced through the night sky and swept around the church as his shrewd pale eyes sought me out.

I used my dwindling power to push up a barrier between the assassin and me. I could feel it rapidly fading and this frightened me. It would only be a matter of time before my attacker would see through my defenses and engage me in battle. I was a strong vampire, that I was sure of, but I was not well versed in physical combat. Also, I had not fed and was weakened. Gregor’s vicious determination terrified me.

Gregor flew about, orbiting around me. Laughing malevolently, he searched for me as I prayed silently to the God I was not sure could still hear my cries. I felt utterly alone and terrified, not sure what I should do.

Drawing back sharply as Gregor swung close by me, I gasped. Perhaps he heard the sharp intake of my breath, for he whirled about and threw a dagger straight at me.

With vampire swiftness, I plunged to one side, trying to avoid the knife that I saw streaking toward me. But my movements were not swift enough to avoid the

knife. It embedded in my arm instead of my breast. I cried out as I fell forward, tumbling off the spire and into the cold night breeze.

Gregor heard me cry out and followed the sound, closing in on me as his body swooped toward me. Another knife streaked through the night and I caught it in my right thigh. My powers flickered, then I impacted with the ground.

With a shout of triumph, the assassin dropped down on the cobblestone road and began edging forward, leaning low, and clutching two wicked daggers in his pale white hands.

I pulled the knives out of my body and fought down a whimper of pain. Something in the metal was burning my flesh, scorching me from within. I sensed Gregor moving toward me and I pushed my powers up as fiercely as I could as I climbed to my feet.

“Little wicked bride of the devil, I can feel you,” he hissed, swaying back and forth as he approached me. His eyes flicked over the shadows as he searched for me.

I flung the knives at him as hard as I could.

Gregor simply reached up and plucked them out of the air. “Thank you for returning my children.”

I turned and ran, desperate to escape, overwhelmed by what was happening. How could such blissful happiness be followed by this hell?

Gregor pursued me, his hearing evidently keen enough to follow my footfalls. I had not the power to take flight again.

My body was burning with pain. I could not fight the agonizing fire welling up within me. The knives had to be some sort of evil magic to do this to me. Never had I felt such intense pain.

Behind me, Gregor’s laughter taunted me.

I ducked around a corner and tried to propel myself upwards. My powers did not respond. I felt my shields fading and knew that soon I would be exposed, visible to all. The pain, a fire, fierce and consuming, rippled through my body. I staggered and fell against the doorway of a mortal dwelling. Fear, stark, and malevolent overwhelmed me.

“Oh, there you are,” Gregor whispered.

I had not even realized I was visible to him until he grabbed me from behind. A knife against my throat, he pulled me into the street. His stale breath was cold against the back of my neck and I whimpered as I trembled.

“Who are you, pretty little one? What is your name and who is your Master?”

I clutched his arm with both my hands and tried to keep my feet under me. I am loathe to admit it, but I am rather petite. He was much taller than I and my toes barely touched the ground. My vampire powers had abandoned me and I felt as weak as a mortal.

Gregor lifted me off the ground and swung me around to slam me up against the side of the building. He shoved me hard against the wall, his free hand

sliding down over my body. I was not sure if he was accosting me or searching for some sort of identifying possession, but I could feel the putrid press of his arousal against my back through our clothing. Frightened and bitterly angry, I tried to bite into his arm, but he sensed the movement and slammed my face into the wall.

“None of that, Bride of Satan,” he said gruffly.

The hand sliding over my body became more aggressive, beginning to fondle me.

“Leave me be,” I hissed through swollen lips.

“Not until you tell me who you are and who is your Master,” Gregor responded in my ear, then licked it.

I was repulsed by the touch of his lean body against mine as I struggled against him. The cold press of the blade against my throat ceased my defiant movements. Gregor let the blade nick my skin lightly and laughed nastily in my ear. I shuddered with pain and disgust, trying to remain calm. For one desperate moment, I wished Vlad would save me.

“Who is your Master? Where does he live,” Gregor demanded. He began to nuzzle the back of my head, licking my neck with his cold, oily tongue.

My flesh crawled as I pressed my lips tightly together. I could not betray Vlad. Besides, Gregor would kill me the moment I revealed that truth to him.

“You will not answer, will you, wench? Well, we shall see about that,” he growled in my ear.

With his knife he sliced open my frock and gruffly drew it back, exposing my breasts. Roughly fondling one, he pressed the knife against the other. “Tell me, whore, who is your Master.”

“No,” I whispered through my bruised lips.

Gregor shoved the knife slowly into the soft flesh of my breast. Again, the metal burned and I screamed. “I enjoy this. I really do. I could make this last for hours, little one.”

“I will not tell you,” I hissed at him. “I know if I tell you the truth, you will slay me instantly.” Fervently, I wished for Vlad to come to my rescue.

Gregor just laughed and shoved the knife in further. “I will slice off your pretty breast then start with the other one if you do not tell me who your Master is and where is his haven. Do you not want to keep your pretty breasts?”

“Go to hell,” I swore at him angrily.

Gregor chuckled, such an ugly sound, and shoved the knife in further, making me scream. “What is the name of your Master?”

I shrieked with agony as tears poured down my face. “I will never tell you.”

Was this how I was to meet my fate? In a dirty alley with a disgusting creature assaulting me? It seemed too awful considering how happy I had been just a few moments before, but my world was now full of excruciating pain and there seemed no salvation. I prayed once more, fervently, desperately, begging

God to deliver me.

“Go to hell!” I struggled to be free of him, but the knife sank further and I screamed again.

The shadows about us rippled. A murky form suddenly slammed into us, knocking the knives out of Gregor’s hands. The assassin jerked back in surprise, loosening his grip on me long enough for me to break free in one desperate move.

Gregor grabbed after me, but he was tossed across the street by an unseen force. His lean body crashed into the wall of the imposing building towering over us and his face was torn open by the impact. Blood poured out of a huge gash in his forehead and ran down his pale face, blinding him. Grunting with rage, Gregor staggered into the street, slicing the air with his knife in a futile attempt to stave off any attack.

Stumbling, sobbing, desperate to escape and tormented by excruciating pain, I was nearly delirious. Looking back, I saw Gregor gripped by an unseen force and slammed back into the wall. This time it was hard enough to stun him, rendering him near unconsciousness as he slumped to the ground.

Terrified, I struggled on, trying to escape.

A swirl of shadows pressed up around me and I screamed with fright. The gloom overwhelmed me, engulfing me, and just when I thought I would die of fear, I felt arms encircling me.

“It is I, Lady Glynis,” the voice of the gentleman vampire whispered in my ear.

Then he clutched me to him, lifting me into the night sky. Below us, Gregor raised his head and howled in pain and frustration.

Chapter 23

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright– Continued

Buda/Pesth, Hungary

I clung to my savior as he swept me away.

“Do not be afraid,” he whispered. “I have you now, and he is too wounded to follow. He will heal, but not soon enough to follow.”

“His knives burned like fire,” I whispered.

I was bundled up into his arms like a child. They were strong in their grip and I felt quite safe. The world was a blur of motion around me. I could tell by the stench that we were in Pesth. The strong smells of food, garbage, human waste, and mortal desperation mingled in my nostrils. I pressed my face firmly into his neck, my wounds throbbing with terrible ferocity.

Then we were on the ground and my body jostled in his grasp as he rushed

over the rocky road. He pushed open a door with his shoulder and heaved me inside. Setting me down, he leaned me against a wall and set about securing the door. The pain was savage, making me weak and my eyesight poor. I could feel my body burning, my blood fighting whatever infection had been inflicted upon me. Turning to me, the vampire slid his hands around my waist and helped me across the room toward a great stone coffin that rose up from the ground like a great altar to an ancient god.

“Where are we?”

“A simple mausoleum. It lies at the edge of a churchyard. No dhamphir will seek us out here. They cannot feel that the ground is not blessed. They will assume it is and that we could not enter.”

He lifted me up in his arms and carried me behind the hewn stone resting place. Obviously, he had stayed here before, a thick feather mattress was nestled between the wall and the platform the stone coffin lay upon. A great many pillows and coverlets of fine quality were strewn across it. He set me down with extreme gentleness and once my head was rested on a pile of pillows, he settled beside me.

I wept tears filled with blood as the pain steadily worsened. I writhed in agony, my hands pulling open my bodice, drawing it back from the ugly gash that the horrible creature's knives had inflicted upon me.

“I need to go home,” I whispered unreasonably. “I cannot stay here!”

The vampire pressed me back down onto the pillows. “But you must stay. The sun is on the horizon. The night has left us and we must stay here.” His long, cold hand pressed against my fevered forehead. “You are poisoned.”

“I burn inside! I burn!” I tried to rise up, for what purpose, I do not know, and he gently pushed me back down.

“I know you do. His knives are blessed and therefore deadly. He did not deal you a killing blow, but the wound is severe.”

“I cannot heal. I try, but I cannot.” I gripped his arms in a fierce grip. “Please, I cannot stay here, My Master--”

His face clouded, then he answered, “Yes, I know, but you cannot return to your Master now. And your Master cannot help you.”

“But he could, could he not?” My fingers dug into the vampire's flesh.

“Yes, he...” his voice caught on the pronoun, “Yes, he could help you. But he is not here, but I may be able to.”

My body arched as another wave of excruciating agony washed over me. “Please, help me!”

“I am old enough and strong enough, but your Master...he may sense my blood in your veins.”

I languished beneath him and he held me tightly. I cried out in agony and he leaned down to press soft kisses to my brow. “Please,” I whispered. “Please, I fear I shall die!”

Pressing his forehead to mine, his fingers stroked my cheek. "Yes, I fear it also." He drew back his narrow face, his eyes straying to my wound. "I can do this if you wish."

I rose up, my hand gripping his coat, my body trembling. "Please, I beg of you. In this moment, I care not what my Master will do to me."

The vampire nodded solemnly and lowered me back down to the pillows. Gently, he pushed back my damp hair and then, with ever so gentle fingers, opened my bodice to view the damage.

"I have to cut away the poisoned flesh. Then I shall pour my blood onto the wound, then I will drink of you and then you will drink of me. My blood can heal you. Do you understand?"

"With all clarity, sir. I implore you, please!" I arched my back as a scream tore free of my lips.

Drawing a small dagger from a hidden sheath in his boot, he leaned over me. "Bear with me, Glynis." He then cut into my flesh as I gripped the mattress tightly.

I knew not what was worse: the wounds or his dagger slicing away my dead flesh. Flinging away the dead, blackened flesh, he then sliced his hand and poured his blood into my wounds. It felt cold, soothing, and wonderful, yet the pain was there. Perhaps not as harsh, but still throbbing.

Tucking his hand beneath my neck, he lifted me to him. I felt weak as my head lolled about on my slim neck. He hesitated as his mouth drew near my flesh.

"Do what you must," I whispered to him.

He bit deeply and my hands gripped his arms tightly. I felt his lips pulling on my tender flesh, and I pressed my body up against his. The rapture of his bite was pure and complete. Never had the bite of a vampire brought such pleasure to me. His tongue slid over the wound, then he tore himself away. I saw his lips, dark with my blood, and I did a rash, flagrantly lascivious thing. I licked the blood from his mouth and found myself kissing him deeply.

His hands tangled in my hair as he answered my kiss, then he drew me away. "Drink," he said.

I wrapped my arms around him and sank my teeth sharply into his throat. He shuddered against me while I drank, swiftly, deeply, and desperately. His blood was rich, thick and cold, far different from mortal blood. And yet, I knew, it was powerful. That power filled me until I was writhing with its fierceness as I felt my wounds close and heal.

Abruptly, he shoved me away. He was flustered and flushed. Awkwardly, he rose to his feet and stood over me.

My fingers slid over my breast, finding it whole as he watched me.

Words, hot, torrid and desperate were not spoken with our lips, but raged in our eyes.

And then we spoke, but not of what we felt.

“Your clothes are soaked.”

“So are yours, sir.”

He nodded.

I rested on his bed, my body propped on my elbows, my damp hair falling darkly over my shoulder.

“We have only just met,” he said after a moment.

“And yet?”

He laughed. “I dare not come close to you.”

Call me what you will. Perhaps I am a wanton woman. I do not care. I loved him and I knew it. Yes, he was beautiful to behold, but his eyes, the story that lingered deep in their recesses...those eyes, spoke to me and I knew his soul. And I knew I loved him.

Standing, I slid off my cloak, heavy with the wet of the rain, then my dress. Trying to look as innocent as possible as I stood in my underclothes, I handed him my clothing. He took them and carefully hung them from an ornate candelabra tucked in a corner. Then he took off his coat and paused.

The sun was rising. I could see that it would shed its deadly rays into the mausoleum. Behind the crypt, we would be quite safe.

I sat back down on the bed and waited for him to return. I was well aware that we both knew that once he returned to me our passion would speak.

The vampire returned and slowly stretched out beside me, still in his damp clothes, save his coat. He closed his eyes, a pretense to sleep.

“You, sir, are a liar,” I chided him.

His eyes flashed open and he regarded me for a long moment. “Am I?”

I smiled at him softly while I gathered myself in my most demure pose.

“I could say the same of you,” he responded, gesturing to my false modesty.

“Then do,” I said boldly.

Instantly his hands were in my hair and his lips were on mine. We kissed ravenously, his body pressing me against the wall. Never had I felt such hunger and our kisses consumed me. I was barely aware of my hands undressing him as he undressed me.

“Your name,” I gasped between kisses.

He laughed and flung me down then covered my mouth with his. “Why ask now?”

Sliding my hands into his hair, I pulled him back from me. “Because, sir, I am about to make you my lover.”

“I am already your lover,” was his taunting response.

“Then I am truly a wanton woman,” I decided as his mouth deliciously tormented my neck with small, shallow bites.

“And would you deny me if I did not tell you my name?” His voice was teasing and his eyes keen.

I shoved him over onto his back and straddled him, my long hair falling around him. He gazed up at me calmly, his hands resting lightly on my waist. I pondered for a moment, and then frowned at him. "You should not know me thus! We have only met."

"And yet," he said.

"And yet," I answered.

We kissed once more and suddenly names were of no consequence. We were mad and the madness was grand. It was as consuming as any vampire emotion may be, fierce and unfettered.

Ridding ourselves of the rest of our clothes, we relished the feel of skin against skin. I wrapped myself around him, legs and arms all tangled in his, and feasted on his deep kisses with wondrous pleasure. My fingers traced the lines of his masculine body, then rose to brush softly over the contours of his face. I was mesmerized by him and impassioned by his sensuous kisses.

This is what it must be to truly make love.

My arms cradled his head and my fingers tangled in his hair when he kissed my breasts. The sunlight was a pale stroke against the stone countenance of the mausoleum, but I was not afraid. We were sheltered in the shadows, hidden from the world.

His body was heavy and firm against mine and when his tongue and lips brushed over the tips of my breasts, a deep moan fell from my lips as I closed my eyes in rapture.

Despite our acute need for each other, despite our wild writhing, he was gentle. Not once did I feel overpowered, but his equal. When I gripped him firmly with my hand, his rewarding kiss made my legs curl and the world spin.

We were impassioned lovers and our fangs drew blood as we explored each other's pale, cool bodies in the pool of darkness in the crypt. Thick, heavy, wanting, I could feel his manhood resting against my thigh as my fingers stroked him, yet he did not force himself on me.

I loved him all the more for that.

It was not until he had me beyond the edges of my senses and I pleaded with him did he enter me and make our union complete. Wrapping my legs around him, I rocked him deep within me, holding his gaze with my own. His long raven locks swayed against my cheek and I raised one hand to his lips. Softly, he kissed my fingertips, then lowered himself to kiss me with fervent ardor.

Skin against skin, his limbs tangled with mine, our bodies locked together in a sacred union. It was perfect. He was thick and hard within me and never had I felt such pleasure. I tossed back my head and he bit my neck lightly. It was as though the world spun around me, and my body drowned in the vibrant pleasure of his lovemaking.

Never had I felt such extreme voluptuousness of senses and yet his body continued to ride mine. My back arched as my nails drew hard down his back.

His mouth still pressed against my throat while I whispered to him, begged him, to bite once more.

Pulling me up with him, he sat back on his heels and held me tightly against his chest. Nuzzling my neck, he drew my body in sensuous movement against his. My hair fell about him, covering him, but he did not mind it. In fact, he seemed to relish the feel of it against his skin. Then his bite came, sharp and beautiful and I was lost to all reason.

I admit, I am but a novice lover, but he transcended all I had dreamed of. Continuously, he drew me high upon a mountain of luxurious pleasure then drove me into the depths of blinding sensation. I returned his bites and our kisses were at times quite bloody. At last, when I felt that my body had reached the pinnacle of its sensation, he gripped my legs tightly around him and pressed firmly into me.

I had the wildest thought in that instant, when I felt the cool rush of his seed filling me. If he were my husband, and I his wife, and we still breathed and lived as mortals, perhaps our child would be conceived in this moment.

Tears came to my eyes as he kissed me softly. I wrapped my arms around his neck and clung to him. The fever broken between us, we slowly kissed and stroked each other's flesh, our bodies still locked together.

Brushing my hair back from my face he laid soft kisses on my forehead then down the bridge of my nose to my mouth.

"You are intoxicating," he finally said.

I laughed softly and my fingers gently stroked his cheek. "As are you."

His well-shaped mouth smiled and his eyes, his so very serene eyes that had been filled with such fire, seemed to carry a smile in them. This warmed my heart as I kissed him with infinite tenderness.

I lay back on the pillows as he slipped free from my body. A beam of sunlight struck just above the edge of the crypt, and I stared up at it solemnly. He drew a silken coverlet over our bodies and kissed the slope of my breast lightly.

"Glynis," he said softly against my skin as his eyes flicked a gaze toward my face.

Lightly stroking his back, I granted him a soft smile. "Yes?"

"Ignatius. My name is Ignatius." He pressed a kiss over my heart, then slid up so he could cradle my face.

"Ignatius," I whispered.

"Yes," he answered, his lips lightly teasing mine.

"It is a strong name, mysterious." I slid my hands into his hair and gazed fully into his face.

"Perhaps, but do not speak it to your Master or any other vampire."

"Why not?"

His smile was dark, but playfully mocking. "You have your secrets as do I."

“Ignatius,” I said, testing it on my tongue and lips. Yes, it suited him. His dark hair, his wondrous eyes, his sensual mouth, his long lean muscled body... yes...

I could feel him firm and heavy against my thigh and I felt my own ardor rising.

“Glynis,” he answered my voice. He, too, seemed to be relishing my name.

Pressing a kiss to his lips, I drew him tight against me. My body shifted and he entered me as I once more loved my mysterious vampire.

Ignatius...

How I love you...

We finally rested in the early afternoon. He covered us with the fine coverlets he had gathered to make his bed. Huddled in the serene darkness beneath the heavy bedclothes, we kissed and whispered. I fell asleep with his chest pressed tightly against my bare back and his face buried in my hair.

I was in heaven.

I woke slowly, dimly aware of his presence. I knew instinctively that he was awake, and I turned to gaze up at him. He was resting beside me, slightly raised up on one arm, regarding me. I slid my hand across his cheek and into his hair, drawing him close to me for a kiss. I adored his kisses and I pressed myself tightly against him as our kisses deepened.

Finally, he drew free with a small laugh. “You are rather insatiable, are you not?”

I smiled wickedly at him, kissing his cheek and nuzzling against him.

“Glynis,” he said softly, his tone quite serious.

“Why are you gazing at me so,” I queried as I drew near once more to my new lover.

He gave me the most solemn of smiles while touching my face gently with his hand. “I fear that when you leave tonight I shall not see you again.”

“Do not speak of such things. Of course you shall see me again. I am merely departing for my own haven. We shall see each other quite often. I am sure of it,” I said quickly, wishing with all my heart that the words I was uttering were true.

Ignatius kissed my mouth softly and whispered, “But you return to your Master.”

I lowered my gaze, biting my bottom lip. “Yes, but I am quite independent of him in thought and action. He gives me a measure of freedom, so I can most certainly see you again if I so desire.”

“And you desire it?”

“Of course,” I said, giving him a fierce pout. “I am not the sort of woman that will allow any man to take her into his bed on a whim.” I pressed my hand to my breast and looked at him plaintively. “Do you not see? You have taken my heart

and I fear I shall never recover it.”

Sliding to his knees, he took me in his arms and covered my face with kisses. “And you have taken mine, my impetuous one.”

I clung to him. “I shall come to you again. I swear it. I am not certain of the date or time, but I will come here. There are matters I must attend to and it shall be difficult for me to slip away, but I shall.”

“Do not come here,” Ignatius answered. “Come to me in one week. There is a small hotel down near the river. It stands in the shadow of the Cathedral. Meet me in the garden at midnight near the fountain.”

I hesitated, then nodded. “I shall. I will find a way to be there.”

His hand gently caressed my cheek as he kissed my forehead lightly. “I shall wait for you until dawn.”

My hands gently stroking his hair, I gazed into his eyes. “I am loath to leave you.”

“I am loathing letting you leave, yet I know you must. You have stolen my heart quite away from me, dear Glynis. Never in my long life have I felt the passions that you have stirred within me. I fear that when you leave I shall feel quite cold again.” He spoke softly, but his tone was rich with feeling. I knew deep within myself that he was not lying. His touch against my skin was so exquisitely loving.

I gave him a long and passionate kiss. “I shall keep your heart as you keep mine and neither one of us shall ever be truly cold again.”

He smiled at me and it warmed me thoroughly. Pulling me down into the comforts of his bed, he again seduced me with his kisses and touch.

I gave himself wholly to him and was not satisfied until he was deep within and we were one.

In the afterglow of our lovemaking, I finally drew away from him and dared to stand in the shadows of the mausoleum to see the last rays of the setting sun vanish from the sky. He rose after me and his hands slid down my arms as his chest pressed against my back.

“It is time,” he said in a voice that caught with emotion.

I nodded as I dared to look into his eyes. My emotions were reflected in his gaze.

We dressed in silence and did not dare to gaze upon each other. It was far too difficult to refrain from touching and dragging each other back down into the soft bed.

I struggled for a bit with my dress, and then he came to me, and with infinite care, helped me fasten it tight around me.

“Your Master,” he said in a low voice. “Does he treat you well?”

I hesitated as I pulled my long cloak around me. Should I speak the truth or not?

He sighed, my hesitation enough of an answer. “Stay with me. Together we

can break the curse that is upon you.”

“I cannot.”

“Why not?”

I looked up at him, my eyes full of tears and my lip trembling. “Because his power over me is not merely his blood, but much more. He has the power to strike down that which is most precious to me.”

“I do not understand,” Ignatius said, his expression confused.

I threw up my hands and pulled away from him. “I know you do not. But it is the truth! He has found a way to keep me his faithful slave beyond his blood and I cannot defy him. When I return tonight, I know my punishment will be cruel, but he will not kill me for he needs me.”

Ignatius came to me, his hand reaching out to touch my cheek. “Tell me. What power does he have beyond his blood in your veins?”

I shook my head and whispered, “I cannot. For what he threatens is too dear to my heart to reveal to anyone.”

Ignatius drew away from me then said, “I wish I understood.”

“I wish I could speak the truth, but I have lost too much to dare to lose what little I have left of a life that was once mine,” I answered. I walked to him and lay my hands on his chest.

He gazed down upon me with adoration and remorse. “I fear for you now. More than before.”

“I shall be fine. I am far too ornery to be struck down,” I assured him. “And, my Master, he does need me. He does.”

He crushed me against his body and we kissed long and passionately. The heat of our desire for each other began to overwhelm our senses and reluctantly we drew apart.

“I must go now,” I said softly.

“I know,” he said in a hushed tone.

“Ignatius,” I said just to hear his name once more.

He looked up and smiled ruefully. “Lady Glynis.”

I bowed to him and he to me.

“Take care of my heart,” he said.

“I shall,” I vowed, giving him one last smile then fled into the night.

I can be cunning when I need to be. Realizing that I most likely reeked of lovemaking and Ignatius, I plunged into the Danube and let the waters sweep over my head. I have no need of breath and my eyes are keen enough that I was able to make my way along the banks, keeping beneath the dark waves.

Only once did I venture out of the black waters and it was to feed upon a man who had fallen asleep on the shore, a notebook sprawled beside him. I took what I needed to sharpen my senses then left him sleeping, his dreams now rich and erotic with visions of pale white women raising from the water to seduce him.

I kept to my silent, watery path back to Vlad's lair. The moon shimmered and wobbled above me, but I was strangely at peace in the dark depths of the Danube.

At last, I rose, sopping wet and disheveled on the banks near our estate and began the journey up to the great house. Already I could feel Vlad's anger and his power seeking me out. Why he had not yet beckoned me, I am not certain.

As I approached the house, dripping wet, water flowing off my hair and gown and I was met by one of the servants. Seeing me, he screamed with fright. Turning on his heel, he fled back into the house, calling out for Vlad.

I was nearly to the back patio when Vlad exploded into view. His long black cloak swung about him and his hair was hanging in loose waves to his waist. Immediately, he glided toward me, his hand rising to strike me down as he unleashed an oath of curses in upon me.

"You should have told me of the dhamphir," I shouted at him, stomping my foot.

This outburst stopped him rather abruptly. "What did you say?"

"I was hunted and nearly caught by a dhamphir last night! He killed my driver and hunted me across Pesth and Buda. I barely escaped by taking refuge in the Danube near the pontoon bridge. I nearly died!" I was so angry it gave credence to my words. Of course, I was furious at him for not telling me of the dhamphir, but I was also terrified to reveal where I had truly been.

"You escaped a dhamphir hunter?" Vlad looked impressed. His anger abated in that moment and he looked at me quite intently.

A thrill of terror swept over me as he examined my face and dress with great interest. I was quite waterlogged and he seemed to believe my story.

"It was not easy. He could have killed me. Luckily, I had fed so I was able to cloak myself from his sight and escape into the water. I am not certain of the limitations of his existence, but I guessed that perhaps being half-human, he would not be able to sustain himself without breath."

"You are a crafty woman," Vlad said after a long beat. "I must remember never to underestimate you."

I brushed past him and into the house. I discarded my soggy cloak and shook out my hair. "I demand that you teach me how to defend myself. I think it quite rude of you to release me into the city but fail to teach me how to protect myself against all manner of predators. I also saw human hunters. I watched them kill a mad vampire." I squeezed out the water from my hair all over the marble floor.

Vlad regarded me coolly, studying my expression. "Did you?"

"Yes, I did," I answered firmly. I was worried that he was seeing through the lies of my tale even though they were wrapped in truth.

A maid came and laid a heavy towel about my shoulders while another got down on her hands and knees to dry the floor.

I pointed at Vlad and snarled, "I shall never forgive you for not teaching me to use my powers." I whirled about on my heel and stormed up the staircase to

my room.

I was in a hot bath, my naked skin growing quite flush as the maid washed my hair, when Vlad once more approached me. He merely entered my room and sat down in a chair, regarding me with great interest.

“You survived the attack of a dhampir alone?”

“Yes,” I answered, and made a great show of scrubbing my toes.

“And hid in the Danube,” he continued.

“Yes,” I responded dismissively.

“You think me a fool?”

I arched an eyebrow at him.

“I think you saw the dhampir kill the other vampire and that you were so terrified you hid immediately in the river. I do not believe he came after you at all. You most likely stayed far too long in the water and the sun rose. And you were stuck, beneath the waves. You are quite lucky that you found a place of darkness.”

I frowned at him and tilted my head back so the maid could rinse my hair.

“No. That is not the truth of it at all.”

“Is it not?”

“No.” I was quite insulted by his accusation that I was lying, even though I was. Yes, I am a complex creature. It is part of my charm.

“Leave us,” Vlad said to the maid.

She immediately obeyed.

I set my chin at a defiant angle.

Vlad rose slowly and walked to my bath. Reaching down, he grabbed my arm and yanked me to my feet. “Then if what you say is truth, you are a far more dangerous creature than I realized. And I must remind you that I am the most dangerous creature in this room.”

I tried to twist away from him, but he held me.

“I merely demand that you teach me to protect myself against all manner of dangers,” I said.

“You demand?” His voice was growing softer, crueler.

I knew what was going to happen next, but I truly could not help myself.

“Yes, I demand. I demand that you treat me as the valuable property I am to you.”

This drew out a loud chuckle from him, then it died as quickly as it rose. I was flung across the room and hit the wall with such force I felt bones crack. Of course, they immediately began to heal.

Then he was upon me, striking me down, splitting my lips, crushing my nose. And yet I healed only for him to brutalize me again. The pain had me trembling, but I continued to try and rise to my feet no matter how many times he struck me down.

“I shall teach you what I deem suitable,” he hissed at me.

I raised a hand and he grabbed it, crushing it. I screamed and he laughed. Grabbing my hair, he dragged me across the room then used it to propel me onto the bed.

“You are my wife, my servant; you shall do as I say. Learn what I wish for you to learn. Do what I wish for you to do.”

My wounds were healing with vampiric efficiency. The pain was fading, but I knew more was coming. I lay on the bed, my red hair falling in a tangle over my eyes.

“Do you understand?”

“Yes, Master.”

Then he was on me and I knew I could not fight him. His lips were harsh and demanding against mine. His hands rough and bruising. I gave myself to him to placate him. To make him feel I was subservient. His servant. His wife. His slave. I moaned for him and gasped for him, but it meant nothing to me. This time I found no pleasure in his touch.

In the aftermath, he left me nude and bleeding on my bed. He dressed in silence as I lay healing the wounds he had inflicted upon me.

“I shall make time to teach you the sword and some of our powers,” he said to me.

Then he left the room.

Closing my eyes, I let the silent tears come and trembled with anger. How I missed my beloved Ignatius. How angry I was that Vlad’s touch had nearly erased my body’s memory of my true love’s embrace.

Magda entered the room and came to me. She was sweet and kind, helping me up to rest in a chair wrapped in a blanket while she prepared a new bath for me.

I wept at her kindness and at my frustration that I could tell none of the gloriousness of my night. Of my great love for Ignatius and the freedom I had felt with him.

I only feel true release now as I write this. For the truth is in these pages and I have a testament to the wonder that is Ignatius. I shall hide this new journal away and keep the other where Vlad can find it. But this is my deepest secret. My most wonderful of treasures.

How I miss him...

Chapter 24

The Journal of Andrew Wright-
Buda, Hungary
12th of March, 1820

The sun was blazing in the skies over Buda when our weather-beaten carriage

finally rolled into the courtyard of Sir Stephen's mansion. Before the driver could even dismount, I shoved open the carriage door and leaped down onto the cobblestone drive. Stretching my body, which was quite sore from our journey, I glanced about at our new surroundings taking in the lush foliage, marble columns, and the imposing house before me.

"He lives fairly well, this Sir Stephen fellow," the mumbling voice of my companion came from behind me.

"Yes, it is quite impressive," I agreed. Realizing my dear friend's older body most likely had suffered more than its share of trauma during our journey, I held out my hand to him. "Here, Doctor, let me help you down."

Groaning as he forced his stiffened muscles into action, Dr. Emil Baum cautiously lowered one foot to the ground. "I think I shall never again be able to walk."

"It was a rather awful journey," I conceded. My red locks flopped into my eyes and I smoothed them back with my hand. "I shall be indebted to you forever for accompanying me all this way."

"Your father was a good friend, Andrew. I had to come for his sake and for your dear sister," Emil responded, his craggy face quite solemn. "Hmm, no one seems to be about."

"I sent word ahead. I had expected a better reception than this."

I was anxious and on the verge of losing my temper. My journey had started off pleasantly enough, but soon after leaving Munich, terrible storms had haunted our travels. We had been holed up in Austria for nearly a week as fierce storms made every mode of transportation impossible. After such difficulties, it was almost impossible to believe I was finally in the city of Buda. There had been many a time on this journey that I had wondered if I would ever survive to see my sister.

There was a sharp cry and I turned to see a beautiful woman with ivory skin and raven tresses staring at me. She had come from around the side of the house and she carried a basket laden with freshly cut flowers. The startled expression on her fine features dissipated as a wonderful smile graced her lips.

"Oh my! You look so much like your father! You really gave me such a fright! I thought your father had returned from the dead," she exclaimed in a delightful, airy voice. Moving quickly toward us, she tucked her hair back behind her ears and smoothed her dress. "I am Maria Ramsay, Stephen's wife. We were expecting you later this evening."

I could not help but return her smile and kissed her hand in greeting. "It is lovely to meet you, dear lady. I am Andrew Wright and this is my companion, Dr. Emil Baum, our family physician. He has accompanied me to examine Glynis."

"How very nice to meet you, Doctor Baum," Maria said.

"It is my pleasure, I assure you," Emil quickly answered, his dark eyes bright

with merriment. He was obviously glad to be free of the confines of the carriage and be breathing in the fresh afternoon air.

The front doors opened and there was a flurry of activity as servants hurried out to help the driver with our luggage. I gazed into the coolness of the marble hall with longing. The sun was awfully hot on my head and shoulders, and I could feel beads of perspiration slithering down my back.

“Come in, come in! How rude of me not to see that you need to relax and refresh yourself. Come in and I shall get you something cool to drink,” Maria said invitingly as she hurried up the steps into her home.

“I think this is a rather nice place, Andrew,” Emil said under his breath to me as he followed our hostess. “Glynis is probably well taken care of in such a place.”

“I hope so,” I answered, my voice a little lighter than it had been in a long time. Yet, there was weariness in my bones that did not originate from the journey, but from that fateful moment when I had opened up the letter that had informed me that most of my family had perished.

Maria seated us in the cool serenity of a lovely parlor before hurrying off to gather refreshments. I sat in a high-backed chair and stared out the French doors at the lush velvet lawn that flowed down to what appeared to be the Danube. A cool breeze wafted through the windows into the room and Emil sighed with contentment.

“You could almost believe you were in England,” he decided.

“More like France. All the furnishings of the house appear to be imported from there. It is all the finest quality. The marble hall we entered through was exquisite in craftsmanship,” I answered.

“It is all very lovely and rather expensive. I thought Sir Frederick Ramsay lost all of his money in outlandish schemes. Was not their estate bought by your family?” Emil asked. His salt and pepper eyebrows rose upward on his high forehead.

I nodded. “Indeed. My great-grandfather was a very good businessman. The family rose up in status because of his dealings. He became very close to the Crown and that is how he was bestowed with his title. When Stephen’s family lost everything, my great-grandfather purchased their estate.”

Emil leaned forward attentively. “Edric told me something about that. He seemed amused with his title most of the time.”

“Well, I do come from a family of self-made men, so the title has never been of any real importance to us except for business connections. Beyond that, my family is not very English. We have quite a bit of Welsh and Scottish blood in our veins.” I pointed to my fiery red hair and smiled roguishly. “Thus the family’s infamous contrary temperament.”

The doctor laughed with amusement. “Yes, yes, your family is prone to... how shall I say it-”

“Bad tempers and stubbornness?”

“To put it mildly,” the doctor said conceded.

“Yes, yes. I am afraid Glynis and I both have our fair share of those qualities.” I grew a bit somber. “That is perhaps why she alone survived. She always was the strongest of the lot of us.”

“As are you, dear Andrew,” Emil assured me.

“I hope so, doctor. I fear I feel quite weak right now. I wish to be strong for her despite my own broken heart.”

“And you shall be,” Emil assured me, then glanced about. “So despite your family taking over their ancestral home, your father and Sir Stephen were good friends.”

“Amazingly enough, yes they were. Stephen used to come and stay at the estate on school breaks with my father. I have never heard of any sort of inference that they were anything other than fast friends.”

“Well, Stephen seems to have done well here.” Emil dug into his coat pocket for a handkerchief with which to wipe his brow. “And we must be grateful to him for taking care of Glynis.”

“Actually, Glynis is not here,” Maria said as she re-entered the parlor.

A servant girl followed close behind with a tray of delicate pastries and another with a tea service.

“I understood from a letter sent to me by Count Dracula that he was arranging to have Glynis moved from his country estate to your home in Buda,” I said, my brow furrowing. “It was insinuated in his letter that he felt she should be closer to good medical care.”

Maria nodded her head as she clasped her hands to her breast. “True true. Stephen told me Glynis was going to come and live with us here. But then something rather wonderful happened.”

“And what was that,” I said a tad impatiently.

“She married Count Dracula,” Maria exclaimed with delight.

“What?” I stood up sharply and before I realized what I was doing, I had taken hold of Maria’s shoulders. “What are you saying?”

Maria smiled up at me, patting my arm. “Calm down, dear sir. Your sister fell in love with Count Dracula and he asked her to be his wife. They were married nearly a month ago. They are at his home here in Buda right now as we speak.”

“I must go there immediately,” I said shortly.

I could not believe my ears. I had come to retrieve my sister and take her home if she was well enough. There was no way on God’s green earth that I was going to leave her with a man I had not even met. “This is impossible.” I turned on my heel to see a tall, extremely slender man with a bland face enter the parlor.

“Ah, Andrew, I am Stephen, your father’s friend. I only just now arrived home from my office. I am glad to see that you arrived safely.” Sir Stephen

extended his hand to me.

I was far too upset to be cordial. “What is this about my sister marrying Vlad Dracula. There was no inkling whatsoever in any of her letters of impending nuptials.”

“It was unexpected, I admit, but it worked out rather well. She is happy with him as he is with her,” Stephen assured me.

“This is preposterous!” I declared.

“Andrew, Andrew, calm down. Calm down,” Emil said softly, taking hold of me. “You are distraught and exhausted from the journey. This has been a shock to you.”

“I want to see Glynis. I want to see her now!”

“Andrew, the dear girl is disfigured and does not like to venture out in the daylight,” Maria said soothingly. “You must understand her predicament. She will come this evening to see you.”

“How badly is she disfigured?” I asked with a sob in my voice. My legs felt leaden and I stumbled backward into a chair. “What is wrong with my sister?”

Maria drew in a sharp breath, looking toward her husband. Stephen sat down next to me and leaned forward, his expression full of sympathy.

“Andrew, your sister was badly mangled in the accident. The carriage plummeted off the pass into the river. Glynis was thrown free, but her face was badly torn by the jagged rocks in the river. She has healed, but her face is disfigured. She insists that no one can look upon her face but Count Dracula. He takes very good care of her and she loves him for it. When she comes tonight, she will be heavily veiled. You must not try and raise the veils or she will become very irate.”

His words horrified me and struck a knife deep into my heart. I felt tears come to my eyes and I covered my face with my hand. Emil leaned over me, patting my shoulder in an effort to comfort me.

“I am sorry to tell you of this unfortunate news, but you left England before Count Dracula had a chance to fully inform you of her condition. Glynis was reluctant to let you know the full extent of her injury. She has been very distraught over her appearance,” Stephen continued.

“But she is a fine, strong young woman,” Maria assured me. “She needs your love, not your pity.”

“Have you seen her?” I asked, looking up at them.

Maria shook her head, her long hair falling about her face prettily. “No, no, my husband visits with them, but I have yet to see her. My husband has told me all that has happened and my heart breaks for her. But do you not see? She has found some measure of happiness with the Count.”

“Yes, yes, Andrew, we must be glad for that,” Emil said quickly. “We must be glad for any happiness she may have now.”

I nodded, my reddened eyes rising up to stare into the gentle expression in the

eyes of Maria Ramsay. "She will come here tonight?"

"Yes, she will," Maria answered gently.

"Until then, you must rest. We have rooms prepared for you. We must insist on you staying with us while you are in Buda. I think the stress of having visitors around her would be unhealthy for your sister," Stephen said in his calm, monotone voice.

"Thank you, Sir Stephen. You are quite kind," Emil declared.

I numbly nodded in agreement. I was overwrought and felt as if I wanted to flee the mansion and rush to my sister's side. But I forced myself to be civil and calm and said, "Yes, we cannot thank you enough for your hospitality."

"It is our pleasure," Stephen assured us with a small smile.

God forgive me, but in that moment, I did not trust him. I felt the worst that I could imagine had befallen my dear sister. I hope and pray to God that I am wrong. But I sit now in desperate anticipation waiting the evening to fall so that I may once more lay eyes up on my sister and know that she is truly safe.

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright-
Buda, Hungary

I awoke with a start.

"Andrew is here," I whispered. I felt it to the core of my very soul, if I have one that is, and flung back the covers.

I quickly dissolved into a mist and slipped through the crack in the wall of our secret chamber. I solidified in the foyer of the house, startling one of our maids.

"Where is Vlad?"

"Madam, your husband is waiting for you in your room," she whispered, then dashed off.

I was trembling with delight and excitement. I knew my brother was in the city for I could feel his presence reaching out to me. A smile gracing my lips, I hurried up the stairs to my bedroom.

So much has happened since I have arrived in the city. It is as if my fortune changed as soon as I arrived here. I am now living in a lovely house, I have fallen madly in love with the mysterious Ignatius, and now my brother was waiting for me.

It is as if I have finally broken free from my dark prison.

As I ran up the steps, these thoughts were in my mind and I felt giddy with the happiness I felt.

"Glynis!"

Vlad's voice was sharp and impatient.

I quickly ascended the remaining steps and hurried into my room. Vlad was waiting for me in quite the restless mood. He was clad in a fashionable suit and his hair and mustache were neatly trimmed.

"First you are stalked by hunters and do not return until the next night. Then

you awoken late. Is this how a small measure of freedom corrupts you?" he asked testily.

"I am sorry, Master. Please, forgive me," I said quickly, my eyes properly downcast.

He waved one hand at me. "Hurry and get dressed. Your brother is waiting for us."

I could not help but smile. Vlad had already laid out a light blue dress and veil for me. We had discussed having me dress in mourning, but Vlad had feared it would upset my brother too much if he saw me as a completely desolate creature. We wanted him to pity me, but believe I had found some happiness. I found it all quite hysterical. Vlad slapped me when I had laughed a little too long at the thought of him being portrayed as a hero of our sordid fake love story.

"You will remember what you are to say," Vlad said firmly.

"Of course, my darling husband," I answered quite sweetly.

He frowned at me, then turned his attention to the view outside my window. My maids came to my aid and quickly helped me to dress.

"You are an insolent creature," Vlad said after a long pause.

"I shall try not to be," I answered.

He turned and looked at me coolly. "I think it would be quite difficult for you."

I smiled ever so innocently at him.

"Is your brother like your father or your mother?" Vlad asked suddenly.

"Actually, he is quite a bit like me," I answered.

"Really?" Vlad looked pensive, then shrugged. "I am sure I can deal with him."

I hurriedly twisted and pinned up my hair into a neat style. "Well, he does put on a very calm façade. But be warned, he has a fiery temper."

Vlad turned to regard me. "I have dealt with you quite well."

I began to fuss with the veil. "Yes, but you will not be able to beat him into submission."

Vlad snarled at me, then regained his calm. He stood quite still for a few moments then walked over to me. Only his green eyes now betrayed his anxiousness. He began to help me arrange the heavy veil over my face and I could feel the trembling of his hands.

"You really do want this to work," I said softly.

"I want to go to England," Vlad responded. "I will not be kept a prisoner forever."

It was as if my own words were coming from his mouth and it sent chills down my spine.

Vlad stood back and surveyed his creation. He smiled with satisfaction and reached out his hand. "Come, Glynis. Let us go greet our future."

I am an impatient creature by my very nature. I do not deal well with

anticipation. I felt as if I would explode at any moment from the excitement I felt as our carriage wound its way through the streets of Buda to Sir Stephen's estate.

I could not help myself and began to cry softly.

Vlad glanced at me, attempting to study my face through the thick veil. My sniffing gave me away and he snorted with contempt.

"Control yourself," he ordered shortly.

I tried to fight down my tears of pure joy, but I was sure my bright smile could be seen beaming through the thick folds of my lace veil.

The carriage turned into the drive to Sir Stephen's home and I sat forward in anticipation. My heart began to beat wildly within me. It was such a human reaction in a vampiric body that it surprised me.

The next few moments were a blur.

The carriage stopped.

The front door swung open.

I unlatched the carriage door.

Andrew raced down the steps toward me.

I flung myself into his arms.

Then we were locked in an embrace so tight, I am quite sure he could scarcely breathe.

"Glynis, Glynis, Glynis," he sobbed in my ear as he clutched me to him.

"Andrew," I wailed, my voice cracking with emotion.

My elder brother kissed my cheek through the veil and rocked me tenderly in his arms, murmuring my name over and over again. Joy, so complete and all encompassing, filled me so that the world around me disappeared. All I could feel was my brother's love warming my soul and his arms holding me. In those wonderful moments, I felt not only his arms around me, but also my father's, mother's, and May's. For a brief instant, my family was whole and complete. The love we had shared filled me and banished the darkness within with its wonderful light.

"Andrew, Andrew, you are here," I whispered emotionally.

"I came for you, Glynis," Andrew answered. "I came to bring you home."

I clutched him desperately and whispered, "I want to go home."

"Angeline is waiting for us there. And the baby, John. You must see him, Glynis. He has the exact same shade of red hair as you do. We named him John Andrew Glenn. Glenn after you, Glynis. You must see him!"

"I want to," I said through my tears. My face was so wet the veil was sticking to my cheeks. "I want to go home."

"And we shall, dear wife, when we go to live in England," Vlad's voice said.

It was like a knife sliced through the happy haze surrounding Andrew and me. My brother became aware of the imposing man dressed all in black for the first time. His blue eyes swept over the Count. I held onto my brother tightly,

daring not to look at Vlad. His voice sounded strained, and I knew I had made a serious mistake.

“I am Dracula,” Vlad said in his somber tones.

“Oh, yes. Count Dracula, the man who saved my sister,” Andrew said in a tightly controlled voice. It was vividly clear that he did not like the Count. It was an instant and intense dislike.

“I am her husband,” Vlad insisted firmly.

I could see that Andrew was trying to peer through the heavy veil into my eyes. “Glynis, did you really marry him?”

I wanted to scream out in protest and tell Andrew all that I had endured, but I bit my lip and only nodded.

Andrew took a deep breath, then extended his hand to Vlad. “Then I must welcome you to the family.”

Vlad took Andrew’s hand and smiled, flashing his very white teeth. “It is a pleasure to finally know my brother -in -law.”

“Are you coming in?” a beautiful woman called out from the doorway from where she stood with Sir Stephen.

“Yes, it will be more comfortable inside,” Sir Stephen insisted.

Andrew kept a hold on my hand and led me up the stairs to the doorway. Vlad followed us. I glanced back to see his face was impassive, but his eyes were stormy.

When I reached the doorway, I felt as though I had impacted with a wall. Andrew passed over the threshold easily, but I found myself rooted to the doorstep. Vlad came up behind me and glared at Sir Stephen.

“Come along, Glynis,” Andrew said, his hand still holding mine, clearly unsure of why I was reticent to enter the house.

“I think I should go in with my husband,” I said quickly, darting a panicked glance at Vlad.

The woman, who I now realized must be Maria, Stephen’s wife, stood waiting for us in the hallway looking quite bewildered. Stephen, the simpering fool, simply looked afraid.

Vlad caught Stephen’s gaze and I felt his dark powers swirl up.

Invite her in.

I heard the silent order and Sir Stephen gulped in response. He surged forward, raising his hand outward.

“Come in, come in,” he said breathlessly.

I felt the invisible wall collapse before me and I stepped into the house. Vlad shot a venomous look at Sir Stephen when Andrew was not looking. The man nearly fell over a vase in his haste to step back from his Master.

Andrew took my hand and led me into a grand sitting room. He sat with me on a couch and attempted to stare through the veils hiding my face.

“Are you happy, Glynis?” he asked suddenly.

“Of course she is,” Vlad answered for me. He sat down in a chair opposite us and gave me a rather stern look.

Andrew pointedly ignored him and persisted. “Are you, Glynis?”

I leaned toward Andrew, took his hand. “Yes, Andrew. I am now.” It was the truth. Staring into my brother’s face brought wonderful contentment and happiness.

“Your face? Does it hurt you much?”

“No, not really. The pain inside is worse,” I answered truthfully.

“I brought someone to see you, Glynis. This is Doctor Emil Baum. Do you remember him?”

A man I remembered quite well from my childhood stepped forward. I recalled he was a friend of my father’s and often tended to us when we fell sick.

“Good evening, Countess Dracula,” he said with a smile.

“Dr. Baum, how lovely to see the face of a friend from home,” I said.

He graced me with a bright smile and kissed my hand. “It is lovely to see you as well, madam. You seem to be doing quite well after all you have endured.”

I suddenly found I could not speak. The presence of my lost family seemed to fill the room and the pain of all we had endured sliced through me with fresh intensity. I gripped Andrew’s hand tightly and fell against his shoulder.

Andrew embraced me and held me close.

I could feel Vlad gazing at me with latent anger looming in his eyes.

After I had recovered myself, Andrew spent the next hour quietly questioning me on all that had happened since our family had journeyed from home. I happily told him the truth of our travels until I reached the point in my tale where Vlad tricked my family into traveling to his estate in the Carpathian Mountains. From that point on, I recited all the lies Vlad had instructed me to tell my brother. Andrew listened with a somber expression and believed all that was told him. When I had finished my tale in a wavering voice, Andrew broke down into fresh tears.

“Thank you, thank you, sir, for saving my sister,” Andrew said to Vlad, his earlier antagonism fading from his voice.

“It was all I could do,” Vlad responded lightly.

“You do not know what it means to me to have her alive. We have always been close and to lose her would have been too much to bear,” Andrew continued.

“You are a good man, Count Dracula,” Emil enthused. He, too, had been touched by the false story of Vlad’s courageous attempt to save my battered self from the raging torrents of the river and his kindness in nursing me back to health.

I could not help but frown at Vlad through my veil. I rather liked the gauzy thing at this point. I did not have to disguise my expressions of distaste.

“I desired to do what I could to help her. Then I was blessed with finding

love in my heart for her,” Vlad said, smiling with satisfaction.

“You are a most remarkable man,” Maria sighed. She also had been swept away by the romantic aspects of the story.

A solitary Count rescuing a damsel in distress then marrying her even though she was disfigured was a wonderful story that warmed the heart.

It was nauseating in its effectiveness to sway our audience.

“He has given me more than you know,” I said darkly from beneath my veil. I could not help myself.

Vlad smiled at me, but I distinctly heard his voice utter Watch your words in my mind.

“Glynis, Dr. Baum has traveled far to see you. Would you please let him see your injuries? Perhaps he could help you in some way,” Andrew asked gently.

I looked toward Vlad, who nodded his consent.

“Well, yes, I suppose. But I only want him to see my face.”

“But, Glynis-“

“Andrew, please, I could not bear for you to see what I have become,” I said sharply and I meant it. The creature I had become was not the same wholesome, vibrant girl I had once been. If Andrew were to see me now, he would know I was something unreal, unnatural, even though he may not know the word vampire.

“Very well,” Andrew sighed. “Then you will allow Emil to examine you?”

“Yes, I will.”

“Maria, take the doctor and Glynis to a room where he may examine her in private,” Stephen instructed his wife.

Maria quickly stood and Emil and I followed her at her beckoning. I walked nervously with the doctor, glancing back at Vlad for assurance as I moved through the doorway. He merely nodded.

Vlad had told me what to do if this was requested, but I was still a little frightened. I had not fed well the night before and the Hunger was growing. My powers were weakening and I did not dare tell Vlad I was afraid I would not be able to carry out his instructions without a fresh infusion of blood.

“Here you are,” Maria said opening a door. “The servants already put your medical bag on the bed, Doctor.”

“Thank you, kind lady,” Emil said with a smile. “Come now, Glynis.”

The doctor shut the door behind us and gave me the warm smile I remembered him gracing upon me when I was a small child. May had hated all doctors but Doctor Baum. She had seen him far more often than I had. This memory only made me feel even guiltier about what I had to do.

“All right, Glynis, sit down on the edge of the bed and I shall take a look at you,” Emil said in his cheery voice. He moved several candles over to the side of the bed for more light and pulled a chair over. Sitting down on the edge of the chair, he reached out his pudgy, wrinkled hands and took hold of the veil.

I took a deep breath and steeled myself for what was to come.

Dr. Baum lifted the veil until my chin came into view, then he hesitated. Obviously expecting the worst, he flipped the veil back over my head. His expression changed from anxious to dumbfounded.

“I do not understand,” he gasped as he gazed into the beautiful perfection that is my face.

I knew from Cneajna’s description of me that I had blazing aquamarine eyes, flawless skin, and ruby lips. I must appear magnificently exquisite, for he could scarcely comprehend what he was seeing.

“I do not understand,” he repeated.

“You will,” I responded.

“It is all a lie,” Dr. Baum whispered in shock. “A lie. But why?”

I could stand it no more. The tension was unbearable. My hands lashed out and gripped the poor doctor tightly. I flung him down onto the bed next to me and straddled him before he could even catch his breath.

“Glynis!”

The hunger welled up within me, fierce and demanding, as I gripped the man tightly by his thinning hair.

“What are you doing? This is madness,” Dr. Baum exclaimed, fear finally rising in his gaze.

“I have to do this to protect Andrew. Forgive me,” I answered passionately.

I drew back my scarlet lips and my fangs descended.

The terror of the moment gripped the poor doctor so tightly he could not scream.

I reared up, then fell on him, my fangs ripping through his throat. His blood welled up through the wounds and into my waiting mouth. I drank with feverish intensity as my victim swooned under my body.

Even though the hunger was terrific in its force, I fought it sufficiently to project thoughts of erotic pleasure into the doctor’s terrified mind to calm him. His blood was not as fresh or tasty as I would have desired, but as it flowed down into me, it renewed my body and fed my powers. As he weakened, I forced myself to pull away from his throat. The hunger was still within me, but was sated enough to stave off the madness.

Staring down into the doctor’s face, I felt terrible remorse, but brushed it away. I had to finish what I had been instructed to do. Leaning down, I licked the two small wounds on his neck until they closed to small white dots. Rising up, I stared into the doctor’s dazed eyes, pressing my hand against his forehead.

“Listen, Emil. You lifted my veil and you saw a horribly scarred face. It was so terrible it broke your heart. The eyes were nearly blind and my features were horribly disfigured. It is nightmare face. It was a violent trauma and you are amazed that I am alive. Do you understand?”

The doctor nodded. “Yes, it is horrible. I wanted to weep.”

“Yes, and you realize that Vlad is a very good man to care for me. You must tell Andrew this. Insist on this fact. Vlad Dracula must be a very good man to marry such a horribly scarred woman.”

“Yes, yes, a good man,” the doctor repeated.

“And what happened here, just now, it was a dream. A dream that you cannot truly recall. Do you understand?”

“A dream. A dream.” His gaze was distant, lost in my power.

“You will feel slightly ill, but it is because you were so repulsed by my appearance,” Glynis continued.

“It was so terrible,” the doctor sobbed.

I sat back with satisfaction. It was done. “Now, Emil, go back to your chair and sit down until I tell you otherwise.”

Emil climbed off the bed and obediently sat down, his expression blank, his eyes glazed.

I waited for nearly an hour in the room, allowing sufficient time for the doctor to examine me. At last, I lowered the veil over my face and raised a hand in front of the doctor’s face.

“It is done,” I whispered.

Doctor Baum snapped into motion immediately. “There you go. The veil is back in place. Do not fret now. It is all done.”

“What do you think, Doctor? Can anything be done?”

The doctor swallowed hard and reached out to grasp my hand. His eyes filling with tears, he shook his head. “Dear girl, if I could do anything I would. The damage is too severe. I am so terribly sorry.”

I almost laughed, but caught myself. The doctor took my strangled laugh as a sob and patted my hand.

“Glynis, you are a lucky woman to be alive. Now, you are blessed with a husband who loves you despite what has happened. He is a good man and you must be happy.”

I smiled triumphantly behind my veil. “I shall, Doctor.” I vowed. “I shall.”

Chapter 25

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

Later-

Silence, cold and seething, dominated the ride back to the mansion. As the carriage rolled past the pastel colored homes of Buda’s wealthy, Vlad stared stoically ahead throughout the ride. Only the dark fires glimmering in his eyes were visible through the cloak of darkness he had drawn around him.

Across from him, I sat in a blissful haze of happiness. Freed from my

cumbersome veils, I enjoyed the sweet caress of the night breeze against my face. A small smile formed on my lips as I gazed down the hillside toward the sparkling river then further to the flatland of Pesh.

I was immune to Vlad's cold stare. My brother's warm embrace had brought a joy to my soul I had not believed to be possible in this vampire existence. Being with Andrew had reawakened my humanity and it warmed the coldness of my vampire heart. For the first time in my undead life, the long festering wounds inflicted on my soul by Vlad's cruelty and Sir Stephen's betrayal were numbed. The comforting love of my brother had been a salve to my tortured psyche.

As the sleeping city streamed past my window, I wished fervently that I would never leave this place. In this city, I had found a measure of peace. First unexpectedly and wonderfully, in the arms of my mysterious vampire, and then in the gentle smile of my elder brother. To be free of Vlad's wretched castle was bliss. His evil permeated every stone of that ruined structure. Here in Buda, his evil seemed tempered by outside forces.

With a pang of guilt, I realized that I had hardly missed my vampire sisters since arriving in Buda. Their beautiful faces and tender embraces seemed like a distant memory. Only Cneajna's image remained vivid in my mind. I could distinctly remember the lovely vampire's teasing smile and bright laugh. I know that if I were to never return to the castle, I would miss Cneajna dreadfully. But with that realization, came the knowledge that I can go on without my vampire mother. Freedom from that terrible place where my family had perished is more enticing than Cneajna's motherly affections. I had lost my mortal mother and, guiltily, I knew I was prepared to abandon my vampire mother.

Now if only I could go to Ignatius. His face haunted me as my gaze drifted upwards to the heavy clouds gliding across the sky. I could vividly remember every detail of his handsome countenance. The mere thought of him made my lips yearn to feel the passion of his kiss once more. How I longed to see him, speak to him, to know him even more.

Above me, the moon escaped the dark clouds and hovered majestically over Buda. Its luminous light embraced the city below. I sighed with contentment. Everything about this night was so beautiful, I wished it would go on forever.

With a creaky sigh, the carriage turned onto the lane leading up to the mansion nestled amongst the oak trees. As soon as it came to a halt, I sprang from the carriage and hurried into the house. I was happily rushing up the staircase when a cold chill swept over my body. Whirling about, I saw Vlad standing in the doorway below glowering up at me.

I knew that look far too well.

With a terrified gasp, I fled up the stairs. With a roar Vlad sprang to the second floor and perched precariously on the railing. I screamed and darted into my bedroom. Vlad launched himself after me as I attempted to shut the door. He brutally shoved it open and pounced on me.

“You tried to warn him,” Vlad growled fiercely.

“No! No,” I cried out. I was pinned beneath him, thrashing wildly about.

“I know ways to make you suffer that you have never dreamed of! If you destroy my plans to move to England, I will slowly torture your brother to death and feast on his blood as I did your father!”

“I did not try to warn him! You heard every word I spoke! I would not betray you! I do not want him to die at your hand! I love him,” I responded in a fervent, distressed voice.

Vlad’s long nails tore my soft flesh as his body pressed heavily down on my bosom. The pain began to become unbearable. I pressed my hands against his chest to push him off of me. Vlad laughed as I struggled, his long tongue darting out between his sharp teeth.

“No, I have a much more delicious way to kill your dear brother.”

With a roar so feral, it made my hair stand on end, Vlad took my head between his hands and twisted it about, nearly snapping my neck. His fangs descended into my throat with a savage growl. A shriek of terror tore forth from my lips as I felt my lifeblood gushing from my body. My nails tore frantically at Vlad’s face, but he was unfazed by my assault.

As quickly as he had attacked me, he flung me away. With a mighty thud, my body impacted with the wall across the room and I fell to the floor. Pressing my back against the wall, I curled up into a tight little ball. Pressing my hand against my throat, I stared across the room with terror in my gaze.

Vlad was laughing with dark menace. He slowly rose to his feet and moved stealthily toward me. Cowering in fear, I began to shudder as my drained body plunged into the violent throes of the hunger.

“It is beginning. Do you not feel it?” Several feet from me, Vlad knelt down, his searing a gaze capturing mine. “The hunger is rising within you. Your veins are dry and cracking. The hollowness within you is expanding. Can you not feel the burning fire twisting and rolling in your gut? Even now, your skin is pale and gray. The hunger is rising, rising, rising up to drive you mad.”

I whimpered angrily, my fingers tugging at my hair. My body was parched and yearning to be filled with the sweet elixir that would renew its former glory. A fierce cold engulfed me, swirling up from the dark void within me. The hunger rose up and began to lick away at my sanity. My senses were acutely focused on my desire to feed.

Vlad chuckled with satisfaction. “Yes, you feel the hunger. And I want to tell you something very important. I am your Master. My power created you. My power can control you. As you are enveloped in the madness, you will lose all rational thought. But listen carefully, my power can still control you.”

“Leave me be,” I sobbed. “I did nothing of which you accuse me.” The dawning horror of his words was beginning to overtake me.

“I can make you go to Andrew in your madness, Glynis. I can make you take

your brother's rich lifeblood. I can make you drain every drop from his body.”

“No!” I hunched over, rocking back and forth in anguish.

“Yes, I can. Andrew's sweet blood could fill you and empower you like no other,” Vlad insisted with wicked glee. “You see, I can control you, Glynis. You are mine and I can make you do whatever I desire.”

“I would never harm Andrew!” I screamed at Vlad in rage and hunger. “Never!”

“My power is beyond your comprehension, woman. I can shape your thoughts and manipulate your body at my whim,” Vlad declared darkly. “You do not have the slightest inkling of how powerful I truly am.” His eyes narrowed as he lifted his hand slowly.

I felt an incredible force smack against my face and my head was snapped back against the wall. An intense power wrapped around me like a clamp. The pressure seemed to push in from every direction and seeped into my hunger ravaged mind. I found myself gasping as the assault reduced me to a quivering mass on my bedroom floor.

Slowly a form began to emerge from the chaos of my thoughts. At first it was a dark mass, without any definition, but as Vlad's green eyes peered into my own, the phantom began to evolve into the figure of a man. Slowly, the wraith took shape in my mind's eye. It took on the familiar guise of my brother. The image Vlad was projecting into my mind was so perfect I could see every minute detail of his appearance. Every freckle and laugh line was piercingly vivid on his smiling face and his unruly ginger hair was in desperate need of attention with his undisciplined cowlick creeping down over his forehead. This projected image was so real I could stare into its eyes and believe it was my brother. His gaze captured mine and I could distinctly see in his eyes the various shades of blue blending together in perfect harmony in a sea of pearly white. In those beautiful kindly eyes, I could see delicate red threads weaving their way through the whiteness. As the image sharpened, I could see those red lines pulsating. My sharp hearing could make out the sound of the blood as it tumbled through those fine thin threads.

Blood coursing through veins and arteries...blood...rich...rich and sweet with power...with life...with the life I hungered for...the hunger that gnawed at me...

The seductive drumming of his young heart spoke to my hunger.

I felt my fangs descending.

How I craved the life within him...the sweet lifeblood...the blood that would renew my body...strengthen me...

I began to scream in horror, shattering the vision.

Vlad smiled and released me from his power. Tossing his long auburn hair over one shoulder, he said, “My darling wife, if I so desired, I could force you to kill your brother and you would be powerless to resist me.”

“You are a monster! A devil,” I hissed at him.

“I am your Master,” Vlad stated. “And you will obey me even if it is to kill your brother.” He smiled, revealing his fangs. “Just as you killed your mother.”

I was overcome by the horrifying knowledge that every word he spoke was true. I had been reborn by his blood and his blood bound me to him. With brutal clarity, I knew he owned me, body soul, and mind. This truth sent me reeling into madness.

The hunger burgeoned up within my tortured body and I shrieked in agony.

Vlad watched me with obvious delight. His low, satisfied laughter echoed through the room. “Are you hungry, wife? Does the hunger tear at you like a thousand hungry rats? Then come. Feast. Join us together once more,” Vlad whispered. With blazing eyes, he sliced his own wrist with one of his long nails and blood bubbled up through the gash. Glowering at me, he offered his bleeding wrist to me, his famished Bride.

I did not hesitate. My lips locked over the wound and I drank feverishly. Moaning with pleasure, Vlad embraced me as I fed. He raised me up until I was leaning back against him and feeding hungrily from the wrist I was clutching frenziedly to my bloodied mouth. Vlad’s blood rushed down my throat into my fevered body. The blood warmed my cold flesh and brought a lustrous bloom to my skin.

Vlad pressed his lips against the softness of my neck and murmured, “You are mine, Glynis. You will do as I say. If you dare disobey me, I will have you take your brother’s life.”

I did not respond to his mocking words. I blissfully continued to feed, luxuriating in the heady ecstasy of my feast.

Chapter 26

The Journal of Andrew Wright -

13th March, 1920

Buda, Hungary

This morning I stood on the bank of the Danube River staring into the tranquil waters in a futile attempt to salve my tortured thoughts. Last night was emotionally wrenching for me and I felt completely spent afterward. It had been difficult to let Glynis leave with that dark and intimidating man. Over and over again last night, I had held my sister’s hand and asked her if she was happy. Every time, she had responded “yes.” Even though her words sounded heartfelt, I felt ill at ease with her answers.

The night was so tiring that I had immediately fallen into a deep sleep upon returning to my room. I had yet to speak with Emil about Glynis. My friend seemed disturbed after the medical examination and excused himself early to his

chambers soon after returning with my sister.

As I brooded over these thoughts, I knelt down and ran my fingers through the cool water, sighing heavily. I know something is amiss in this place. It is more than my sister being scarred and my family being dead. Even in the bright light of the day there is a foreboding presence that hides in the shadows of the trees. I feel it to the depths of my being. An evil force is in this city. Last night, when I had gazed into the green eyes of Count Dracula, I had been convinced that it emanated from that man .

“Andrew, dear boy, there you are!”

I turned around to see Emil hurrying across the lush green lawn to join me at the river’s edge.

“I have been looking for you, Andrew. I came down late to breakfast and you were not there. I assumed you had already eaten. And here you are,” Emil said breathlessly, a huge smile on his friendly face.

“I was up rather early,” I responded blandly.

Emil looked over the sparkling waters, the lush greenery, and the blue sky above. “It is quite beautiful here, is it not?”

“I suppose,” I answered in a troubled voice.

“Your sister must love it here. Plenty of fresh air to help her regain her strength and bright sunlight to cheer her up.”

“How bad is it?” I asked. As the words issued forth from my lips, I felt fearful of his response.

Emil’s smile immediately vanished. He hesitated, rubbing his mustache while looking pensive. Finally, he said, “It is horrible, Andrew. I do not wish to upset you, but it is quite horrible. The sister you remember is the one I wish for you to hold dear to your heart. You do not wish to see what she has become.”

I took a deep breath and wiped away the single tear that fell down my cheek. “I need to know, doctor.”

He sighed then said, “She is nearly blind, Andrew. Her mouth is quite twisted. And her nose, well, it must have been partially ripped away. It is a terrible sight. I could barely look upon her face. Remember her as she was, Andrew, and do not press her to lift the veil.”

I moaned as I struggled to contain my emotions.

“Andrew, she is lucky to have found a good man like Count Dracula to care for her. He must have a good heart to marry a woman who is so terribly disfigured.”

“I do not trust him,” I declared in a fierce voice.

“Andrew, this man is taking wonderful care of your sister and she loves him. He is a good man to love her and protect her.”

“There is something about him that I just do not like,” I insisted. “I sense that something is amiss.”

“He is a darkly handsome man, who is quite imposing, true enough. But he is

a good man to love Glynis in her condition. You have to see that he has nothing to gain by taking her in. It is the act of a good and kind heart despite his dark appearance and intimidating manner.”

I rubbed my brow, nodding dismally. “He must be a good man to do this for her.”

“Just give him a chance to prove himself,” Emil urged me. “Give him a chance to show you what sort of man he truly is.”

I drew in a weary breath and rested a hand on Emil’s shoulder. “I shall trust your judgment, my dear friend, and do as you say. I will see what I can do to help them as I will try to accept what has to be.” I was consumed by my thoughts for a long moment, then I said, “But right now, I need to see her again. I cannot help but feel that all is not as it appears to be.”

“Andrew, you must accept what has happened,” my friend insisted. “That he is a good man to take her in. To love her.”

“Yes, yes,” I said dismissively. I was getting rather tired of his assertion of my sister’s new husband’s virtue. I set my jaw with determination, and said, “I definitely need to see my sister again. I am going to speak with Maria about securing a ride over to the Dracula estate.”

“If it will make you feel better, Andrew, do what you must. But, I am positive that your sister is in the care of a good man,” he persisted.

“Yes, yes, you keep saying that. Are you interested in coming with me?”

“Actually, I think I should like to sit in the garden and read. Our journey here was tedious.”

“You do look like you are in desperate need of sunlight. You look rather pale this morning,” I decided. I turned on my heel and strode quickly back up to the house. I turned to apologize to him for my abruptness and saw him standing in the shadows of a great tree, his features thoughtful, his hand pressed to his neck. He seemed lost in thought so I let him be and continued on.

Later-

I arrived at the Dracula residence just as the great yellow sun reached its pinnacle in the skies above Buda. As I stepped down from the caleche, I was mildly taken aback at the fact that scarcely any sunlight seemed to reach down to touch the imposing house. Gazing upwards, I contemplated the silent stillness that shrouded the building. The air was very still and seemed to weigh heavily upon my shoulders. It was as if the wind had fallen asleep.

As I stood uneasily on the steps of the great house, it slowly dawned on me that not one bird sang in the tall trees.

A great sense of foreboding swelled up within me.

Suddenly, the front door yawned open and a young woman emerged. The woman’s black hair was pulled back severely from her pale face and her piercing gray eyes glared down at me.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded tersely.

“My name is Earl Andrew Wright. I am here to see my sister, Lady Glynis. I mean, Countess Dracula.” I managed to choke out my sister’s new title despite my dry throat.

The woman stared at me with cold eyes for a long searing moment, then took a deep breath. “She is indisposed.”

I was slightly taken aback by the barely disguised hostility in the woman’s voice. “I would very much like to see her. I am her brother.”

“The Countess does not like to entertain during the daylight hours,” the maid insisted.

I became quickly impatient. “Listen here. I am her brother. I traveled all the way from England to see her. I demand that you go to her at once and tell her that I am here.”

The maid pursed her lips then curtly nodded her head. “Very well. Come in.”

I moved quickly up into the house before the maid could change her mind and slam the door shut on my face. As I stepped into the foyer, I was struck by how cold the house was. The maid closed the door behind me, and, eerily, the house seemed to echo with the sound of the latch catching. The foyer was extremely dark, and I felt the fine hair on my arms rising beneath my starched shirtsleeves.

“Stay here,” the maid ordered without any concern for my position as her mistresses’ brother.

I watched suspiciously as the maid climbed the stairs to the floor above. It was so cold, I found myself shivering. Silence and shadows ruled the house. Hardly a sound broke through the chilly silence. It was as if I were in a mausoleum. The cold sterility of the marble foyer made me shudder as I glanced about for a place to sit down. I spotted a high-backed chair in an alcove beneath the stairs and hastened over to it. Sitting down, I smoothed my cowlick back from my eyes and waited.

It began so slowly that at first I did not take notice. It was my feet that first turned so completely cold they went numb. Slightly put off by this strange occurrence, I tried to stamp my feet awake. It was then I felt the fine pinpricks of a thousand icy needles flowing up my legs and quickly rushing up over my back. At once, I could not move my legs.

“What on earth?” I declared in surprise.

Then the cold needle pricks rippled over my arms as I recognized I was becoming immobile. Frightened, I attempted to stand up, but already my body had become useless to me. Icy fingers trailed up my neck and over my scalp. Horrified, I felt my face harden into a mask.

Before I could fully comprehend what was happening, I was frozen to my chair, completely unable to move. I felt my throat painfully constrict and I struggled for breath. I quickly began to panic for I could not fathom what was happening to me. I tried in vain to move one hand. Casting my gaze downward,

I could see my hand resting on my knee, but it would not obey my silent orders. It was as if I were encased in stone.

Hunter!

I am not sure I actually heard a spoken word, but I could swear I had heard the Count's arrogant voice, tinged with anger, whispering just that one word in my ear. I attempted to open my mouth to call out for help, but my jaw was frozen shut.

Andrew!

Now I was certain that I had heard Glynis' voice. Frantically, I tried to vocalize, but my mouth would not form any words.

Andrew! It is Andrew!

I was straining with such great force against whatever power had frozen my body that when I was suddenly freed, I was pitched off the chair and onto the floor. Gasping in shock, I found myself on my hands and knees staring down at my own startled reflection on the marble floor. Taking in great gasps of cold air, I tried to fathom what had just occurred. I was still kneeling on the floor when the shiny black boots and starched hem of the maid abruptly covered my reflection.

I scrambled to my feet nervously, feeling my face flush red with embarrassment and consternation.

"Countess Dracula is resting. She is very tired after last night and the doctor has ordered her to rest in bed all day. She is not to be disturbed."

I was almost relieved to hear the curt words of the maid. I was free to escape this strange house. "Could you please tell my sister that I will return tonight? I do want to see her."

"I will inform the Count that you will return," the maid responded.

Once out of the house, I drew in great breaths of fresh air and rubbed my hands vigorously over my face. I am not sure what has happened to me, but it has struck terror into my soul. There is something malevolent lurking within the house and I am fairly certain, even now as I write this, that it is disguised as a man named Count Dracula.

Hurriedly, I climbed into the caleche and ordered the driver to my next destination. Sitting back, I glanced out at the house shrouded by shadows and shuddered. I want my sister to be free of that place and that horrible man.

Later -

Sir Stephen strode quickly across the marble floor, his hand held out in greeting to me. I had arrived at Sir Stephen's offices a few minutes earlier and was relieved to see the bright sunlight pouring through the tall windows.

"Andrew, it is good to see you. I was not expecting you," Sir Stephen said warmly as he took my hand. "My business partners have left for the day, so I am free for the afternoon if you wish a tour of the city."

“I came on impulse with no intentions. Just merely curious to see your place of business. It is a very modern building, is it not,” I said as I admired my surroundings. I truly was not sure why I had decided to visit. I do not particularly care for Sir Stephen, but I did want to know more of Count Dracula and his dealings.

“It was built just five years ago. Mark my words, Andrew, Buda is on the verge of greatness. There is some talk of Buda someday being joined with Pesth into a great cosmopolitan city and I would not doubt if that were to happen in the next thirty years,” Sir Stephen said with great enthusiasm.

“And those who will benefit are those who are ready for change,” I said with a wry smile.

“And I am ready. Already a great many businessmen from all over the Continent are traveling here. I am quite happy to represent them in their business dealings,” Sir Stephen said smugly.

“I hear there is talk of revolution against the Hapsburg Monarchy,” I commented spontaneously as my host escorted me into a luxurious office.

“There is always talk of revolution in Hungary,” Stephen responded quickly. “As an Englishman I really do not care what fate befalls this country. One way or the other someone will need a solicitor when it is all said and done.”

“Revolution always happens when common men are treated no better than dogs,” I decided casually. “And I do not want my sister in a country that could face a revolution.”

“It will be a long time in coming. The Princes and Barons of this country are very powerful. The people beneath them obey them without question,” Sir Stephen said in a rush of words. He almost seemed desperate to put any misgivings I had about the country to rest.

I raised an eyebrow at his words, seeing a pathway into the conversation I desired to have with Stephen. “And this is how it is with Count Dracula? His servants respond without question?” I queried in a droll voice.

Stephen hesitated as he rounded his desk, glancing nervously back toward me. “Count Dracula is a great man. He comes from a very well respected family, and your sister is in very good hands, I can assure you. He will care for her with infinite generosity.” Stephen fell back into his chair and forced an anxious smile. It was obvious that he was thinking rapidly, trying to decide what to say next. “Besides, he plans to move to England soon.”

“Really?” I furrowed my brows thoughtfully. “Ah, yes, I do believe I heard him make mention of that last night.”

“Yes, yes, Count Dracula wishes to leave Hungary for England. I believe that he, too, sees the changes that are coming to Hungary. There are undercurrents of instability in the countryside where he resides. He wishes to establish himself in England before there is a possibility of collapse. As a land owner he has more to fear from any sort of revolution than I, a mere solicitor of wealthy men.”

Stephen's words were rushed, tripping off his tongue in a mad dash.

I considered Stephen's words thoughtfully. I had mentioned revolution on a whim, remembering rumors I had heard along my journey through the lands ruled over by the Hapsburg Monarchy. I had, in passing, been mildly concerned about how the quest for independence would affect my sister, but now Stephen seemed to have seized on the concept of revolution. I could see the nervous trembling of the man's fine long hands and it slowly dawned on me that Stephen was almost in a state of panic.

"Is the Count a wealthy man?" I asked finally.

"Oh, extremely. Very wealthy. He owns much land. In fact, he has a fine vineyard not far from the city. I could take you there," Stephen responded. His eyelids fluttered and his long face seemed very pale.

"So, the Count wishes to move to England with my sister then," I said in a soft voice.

"Yes, yes, and I would look over his business matters here after he left," Stephen said.

"I think I would like to discuss this with him further. I have a great many business contacts in England and perhaps I could help him establish himself there," I said with a bland voice, but settling a keen gaze on Stephen.

My host seemed extremely relieved at my words. "Yes, yes, Andrew, that would be excellent! You could help him with his move to that country. Socially, you could help him tremendously. That would be wonderful for you to do," Stephen declared happily. "He would be so grateful."

"It would be an absolute pleasure," I answered.

I am not an idiot. Sir Stephen was nervous at the mere mention of Dracula. That only fueled my suspicions about my sister's new husband.

As I sat in that grand office, staring at the slender nervous man, I knew that I had been drawn into a web more sinister than I could have imagined. Count Dracula has drawn me here for a purpose. Perhaps the only reason he married Glynis was to ensure that he had an established contact in England that could help him move into English society with ease. And now I am ensnared, as is my sister, and I can only hope I am clever enough to outwit him.

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

13th of March, 1820

Buda, Hungary

I admit that I was ecstatic, yet nervous, to have my brother visit my home.

I sensed his presence earlier in the house as I slept with Vlad in our hiding place. At first I had been frightened, fearing that a vampire hunter had entered the house. When I had felt the surge of power beside me, I had known that Vlad feared the same. It had been several incredibly tense moments before I had recognized my brother's presence. Only then had Vlad released Andrew from

his power.

When we emerged from our hiding place early this evening, Magda informed us that Andrew would be visiting us soon. I immediately instructed the servants to prepare a fine feast for my brother. I desperately wanted for my brother to feel comfortable in my new home. Vlad's threat had been seared into my heart and I was desperate to dispel any reservations Andrew had about my new life. If Vlad forces me to kill Andrew, I know I will fall into a madness from which I cannot return.

When Andrew finally arrived at the house, I made sure I was waiting for him on the front steps. Without a word, I embraced him tightly and kissed him through my veil. Immediately, I had sensed his unease and it disturbed me deeply. Vlad then came out to greet Andrew and invite him into our home.

Even though Vlad was cordial and pleasant, Andrew seemed too quiet. His gaze was searching and penetrating. Conversation was stilted throughout dinner. I did most of the talking, making up lie after lie about my new life. Andrew listened thoughtfully and watched my veiled countenance with great interest.

Vlad spent the entire dinner watching my brother. It made me very nervous, so I became a little too excited. Beyond that it was very awkward to sit at a table laden with wonderful food and not being able to eat a bite. Vlad declined to eat on the pretext that he had eaten dinner with me earlier in the evening. My brother had looked a little suspicious, but had accepted the explanation that I was forced to eat in private due to my condition.

We retired to the grand parlor that is Vlad's pride. It is lovely with its imported furniture in deep purples and reds. Andrew sat next to Vlad smoking a cigar while Vlad lit up his pipe. I took my place with trembling hands in my lap. I drew them under my veil in an attempt to hide them from my brother's gaze.

"I visited Sir Stephen this afternoon," Andrew said abruptly after Vlad had finished with a short lecture on the history of Buda.

"And how was your visit," Vlad responded coolly.

"He had a rather slow business day and we spoke for several hours. In the midst of our conversation, he told me that you are seriously considering moving to England."

I could not be sure, but it seemed as if there was a sly edge to my brother's voice.

"I actually have decided to move to England. It is the birthplace of my beloved wife and I feel that we would be very happy there," Vlad answered smoothly as he bestowed Andrew with a very charming smile.

"Would you not miss your own country?" Andrew asked him.

"I would, but Glynis' happiness is much more important to me," Vlad said with great earnestness.

Liar!

Vlad cast a sharp glance in my direction. "She is the most important woman

in my life. Our futures are intertwined.”

The double meaning was obvious to me, and I bit my lip to prevent myself from retorting flippantly.

Andrew looked toward me and even though he could not see my face, I forced a bright smile. “I want to go home, Andrew, and Vlad has promised to take me back to England.”

Andrew dragged on his cigar thoughtfully, then exhaled slowly. The smoke curled about his head like a lazy snake then drifted up into the shadows. “Well, then I promise to help you in your move across the Continent. I have many connections and I would be pleased to help you in anyway possible.

I knew that was exactly what Vlad wanted to hear. I could actually see Vlad’s delight come alive in his green eyes.

“Thank you, Andrew. That would be quite excellent. I do most of my business within the confines of those countries under the control of the Hapsburg Monarchy. I must admit I have absolutely no connections in England whatsoever. I am in desperate need of a solicitor to handle my affairs. My dear friend, Sir Stephen, does not have the influence in England he would like to believe he has. He has been unable to secure the proper law firm to suit my needs to assist me in my plans to move to your wonderful country,” Vlad said in such a courteous, friendly tone it gave me the chills.

“Well, I have knowledge of several solicitors in London that may be interested in handling the affairs of your estate,” Andrew assured him.

I felt sick to my stomach. Vlad was obviously delighted in Andrew’s willingness to help him and that meant Andrew was safe. But that also meant that Vlad was moving closer to having control over Andrew. I saw how Stephen cowered like a lowly servant before Vlad. I hated the mere thought of Andrew ever submitting in such a cowardly manner to my Master. Even if it would spare him Vlad’s wrath.

Vlad and Andrew continued to chat with some enthusiasm. My brother fell into describing everything English to Vlad in his very charming way. He went into some detail about the glories of London and the beauty of the countryside. He is a great storyteller and Vlad sat absolutely enraptured. I could see the bright fires burning in his eyes as he listened. I could see his desire to leave his homeland clearly on his features.

Vlad has not mentioned again the other vampires that evidently rule these lands, but I am beginning to believe that perhaps Vlad wants to escape from them just as I desire to escape from him.

As I sit here and write about tonight’s events, I know this much is certain. Ever since I departed from the castle, the boundaries of my existence have expanded significantly. I now know that there is an entire vampire world hidden in the shadows of the mortal world. This fact gives me hope. If I am clever enough, I know I can escape Vlad and perhaps find my own way through this

strange new world.

Back to tonight's events...

It was nearly midnight when Andrew finally managed to delicately excuse himself from the long conversation he had found himself involved in and invited me for a midnight stroll.

"I hope you do not mind, but I would very much like to talk with my sister alone," Andrew said with his usual boyish smile.

Again, I sensed something peculiar in Andrew's expression but I could not quite decipher it.

Vlad glanced toward me, nodding. "Of course, of course. The moon is almost full tonight and the gardens are beautiful by moonlight."

Andrew offered his arm to me and I happily let him help me to my feet. As we moved to leave the room, arm in arm, Vlad stood up and took hold of my other arm. He leaned forward and kissed my cheek affectionately and whispered so lightly no mortal could hear, "Remember."

I lowered my head slightly, acknowledging his threat. Andrew either took no notice of the exchange or pretended not to have seen it. Smiling warmly down at me, he guided me out of the house and down into the serenity of the gardens.

Vlad was right. The garden was lovely by night. The moon was a brilliant orb in the indigo sky. I could not help but find comfort in its soft luminescent light.

"We have hardly had a chance to really speak tonight," Andrew said after several minutes of peaceful silence. We strolled slowly down a pathway winding our way through the slumbering flower beds. "Your husband rather likes to talk."

"He is a very intelligent man," I conceded carefully. I could still sense that there was something peculiar about my brother's state of mind.

"He seems to be very intent on moving to England," Andrew decided in a very odd tone.

I cast a wary glance at my brother as I carefully considered my answer. "My husband is fascinated by our homeland."

Andrew suddenly whirled about and took me roughly by the shoulders. "What has happened to you? Where are your flippant remarks? Your sharp tongue? You answer me as though you are frightened to answer incorrectly. I do not know what is happening here, but something is deeply wrong. Wrong with you, with Vlad, with everything. Nothing is as it seems and I know it! You cannot hide the truth from me. He is not here with us now, Glynis. You must tell me the truth now. If you do not, I will refuse to help Vlad and I will find a way to free you from this marriage and take you home!" Andrew said all this fiercely, his grip tightening on my arms. His face was full of desperate anger and frustration.

Fear gripped me so tightly I could scarcely think straight. I had to calm his

fears and protect him at all costs. “Andrew, please do not be upset.”

“How must I feel, Glynis? My family died in a strange accident! My only living sister has her face hidden behind a thick veil so I cannot even look upon it! I am being forced to help a man I cannot even bear move to England. What happened, Glynis? What happened on that damned mountain? What happened to everything that was dear to us?” Andrew demanded fiercely. His eyes glittered with tears. “Please, Glynis, tell me the truth.”

I took a wavering breath, pressing my hands against his flushed face. My touch seemed to soothe him, and he fell against me.

“Please, Glynis, please, tell me.”

“Andrew, we have always been close. Always. We were always in trouble together and I always trusted you with my deepest secrets. Remember when I could have blundered into the most horrible trouble after I managed to meet Lord Byron. But I did not because you never told Mother and Father. Andrew, dear Andrew, I must speak to you frankly. Please, please, listen to all I say and take all to heart,” I said breathlessly, my mind racing. I had to make him believe me and to do that, I had to tell the truth or a close version to it.

My brother stared down at me fearfully, his gaze searching for the glimmer of my eyes beneath my heavy veil. “Tell me, Glynis. Tell me the truth. Please, I beg you.”

I drew in a wavering breath then began to speak in a soft, passionate voice. “Andrew, our family died tragically in the Carpathian Mountains. Nothing can change that fact. I tried to save them, but I was helpless against those forces that took them from us. I was devastated when our family died, Andrew. Quite honestly, I went through a period of madness. I could not accept that Father, Mother, and May were dead. I was desperately lonely without them, and I could not deal with what I had become. I hated my very existence and prayed for death. I had no peace, no comfort. I was very much alone in my own personal hell. After awhile, I took comfort in knowing that our family is safe in the arms of God and that in England you were safe with Angeline. But still there were times I felt I might go mad forever. You have noticed how peculiar my relationship is with my husband. It is very difficult to explain our situation. He is my husband, my protector, and in some ways, my captor with his need for me. I cannot leave him, Andrew. I am bound to him because of all that has happened. He has my devotion, my loyalty. He demands it and I give it to him. Because of him, I am here today with you. I need you to accept these things. I know it is difficult for you to see me this way and accept that I am married to a mysterious foreign count, but this is the reality of my life now. Vlad wishes to go to England. So do I. I want to go home, Andrew. I want to see England. I want to leave this country and all the horrors that I have suffered here and find peace in England. Please, help us, please,” I finished emotionally. I collapsed into his embrace.

Andrew wrapped his arms tightly around me, fresh tears falling down his ruddy cheeks. “Oh, Glynis, Glynis. I love you, dear sister. I will do as you ask. I cannot deny your request. It just seemed so odd to see you this way. I do not know what I thought, but I was afraid that you were unhappy. I wanted to free you from Vlad.”

“Andrew, just help us move to England and that will make me so very happy. It is all I ask of you. Please promise me, you will do what Vlad requests,” I urgently whispered.

“I promise, Glynis,” my brother swore passionately. “I promise you that I will help you.”

I wept with relief and despair. Andrew is snagged in Vlad’s web and I have lured him into it. Bitterness filled me as I clung to Andrew in desperation.

It still fills me as I write this. I swear that no matter what happens, I will not allow my brother to endure the same fate as the rest of my family. In the end, I would rather kill myself and destroy Vlad’s plans than ever allow Andrew to suffer.

Chapter 27

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

8th of April, 1820

Buda, Hungary

This last month has been the most marvelous yet nerve wracking time of my short life as a vampire. After my emotional plea to my brother, Andrew has endeavored to accept my new life. Though a hint of suspicion has lingered in his blue eyes, Andrew has held his tongue. Around Vlad he is quite civil, bordering on extreme politeness.

I suspect that he is a little fearful of Vlad. Even dressed in modern clothing with his hair neatly trimmed, there is still a certain quickness to his movements and a coldness in his eyes that subtly reveal his predatory nature. Wisely, Andrew has been reticent about discussing his own life in front of Vlad and always keeps the conversation geared toward Vlad’s own plans. My brother is very clever. I suppose it is a family trait.

I regret that I have not kept up with my journal. I simply have not the time. Every evening Andrew arrives at the mansion and visits until early in the morning. Sometimes Emil comes along, but mostly Andrew visits alone. Much to my relief, now that Vlad is satisfied that my brother will assist us, he has lost interest in supervising my brother’s visits. Very often he leaves us alone to reminisce.

My time alone with Andrew means so very much to me. After his initial

awkwardness due to my veiled appearance and his displeasure over my new husband, Andrew has now taken up his old role of pesky, elder brother.

I adore him, yet his presence has caused me some difficulties. I have found it quite difficult to hunt efficiently. In order to hunt, I have to beg off from our visits, sending a messenger during the day to inform my brother I am not well. Of course, this only concerns him more and being as stubborn as I, he has shown up while I was hunting and insisted that he see me immediately. Unfortunately, Vlad often has to play the role of protective husband during these times and it has not helped them be fond of each other.

Sadder yet, I have not able to meet my beloved Ignatius at the appointed time. My brother and Emil stayed quite late the night I had agreed to meet my new lover and Vlad had decided to join us. I had considered sending Ignatius a message, but I cannot truly trust the servants. I fear they are totally within the thrall of Vlad's power. I was quite morose that night, my despair threatening to overwhelm me. My brother realized my state of mind and tried to comfort me, but it only made Vlad angry.

It was most difficult explaining to Vlad that I was not in the mood for visitors, even my own brother, and that the source of my despair was simply me being moody. I fear he suspects that I am hiding much from him, and, of course, I am.

Tonight, we were especially jovial though. We took a long walk and I felt much better. I was able to hunt yesterday and the blood has refreshed me greatly. As we strolled along the banks of the river, we could not help but speak of the past.

"Do you remember when we managed to remove those old swords off the library wall and began to swing at each other," Andrew asked me abruptly.

"Do I ever! Mother smacked my backside so hard I thought I would never be able to sit down again," I said with a laugh.

"You very nearly decapitated me if I recall correctly," Andrew answered with a wide grin.

"Oh, yes! And then I fell off the library table and drove that old sword straight through the back of a chair!" I laughed at the memory. I had been about ten at the time and always ready for adventure, which usually turned to mischief.

"I remember Mother's tirade in Italian to this day," Andrew recalled fondly. "You could always tell how angry she was by whether or not your scolding was in English or Italian."

"Or by how fast she spoke," I reminded him.

"Ah, yes. You and I were an awful nuisance to Mother," Andrew said with a laugh.

"I know I was frightful to Mother, but in the end, we were at peace," I said with a soft, bittersweet sigh.

"I am glad for it, Glynis. I always thought you were exactly like Mother. Both of you were full of opinions, fierce and absolute towers of strength on top

of being amazingly beautiful,” Andrew said lovingly.

At the thought of my last moments with my mother, I felt tears welling in my eyes and I raised a hand to wipe them away quickly. I could not risk blood seeping onto my veil.

Andrew became aware of my sniffing and immediately embraced me. “Glynis, darling, you are still beautiful to me. No matter what has happened, you are the most beautiful sister in the world.”

I began to laugh and nearly choked on my tears. Here Andrew thought I was horribly mutilated and in truth I was far more beautiful in my Undead condition than I had ever been in life. “Oh, Andrew, you are so wonderful to me.”

He hugged me tightly and kissed the top of my head. “I adore you, Glynis. I do not want to leave you here.”

“I will be fine, Andrew. I promise you that. I made the same promise to Mother before she died. I am strong, Andrew, and no matter what happens in my life, I want you to know that I will be all right in the end. I will never stop loving you and Angeline and my darling little nephew.”

“I cannot wait for you to see him, Glynis. I swear he has your personality,” Andrew said fighting back his tears.

“Oh, dear! I do believe you are in for a bit of trouble then,” I exclaimed with delight.

Andrew tapped his chin with one finger, then said, “Yes, yes, I do believe I had better start hammering down everything in the house as soon as I return to England.”

“And remember the third floor banister. You must post a guard to watch it at all times,” I said with a bright laugh.

“We nearly broke our necks that day. How were we to know it was freshly polished that morning?”

We both dissolved into laughter.

As I sit here, writing this, I cannot help but smile. My brother’s presence restores me in a way I cannot describe. When I am with him, I nearly feel human. It is a gift that he could not possibly understand.

Yet, I am sorrowful, for soon he shall leave and I have yet to see my beloved Ignatius.

I pray, though I do not know if God hears, that I will find my way through this darkness and find my own happiness.

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright - Buda

10th of April, 1820

Oh, glorious night of nights! I have much to report.

I was quite happily arranging the flowers in the front hall when Magda approached me with the most solemn expression.

“Madam, this arrived earlier when you and the Master were sleeping,” she said.

I took the white enveloped proffered as I furrowed my brow. I admit I was positively puzzled. I could not imagine who would be sending me a formal invitation. Prying open the seal, I slipped out the card. I was surprised to see that the Count and Countess Dracula, according to the fine writing, were invited to an opera at the palace of one of the aristocratic families of Buda by the name of Dosza. I was so shocked by the invitation I froze where I stood, staring at Magda with open astonishment.

Vlad strode down the stairs and spotted me standing like a marble statue in the foyer. “What have you got there?”

I just let out a small sound and extended the hand clutching the invitation toward him.

Impatiently, he marched over to me, and grabbed it from my hand. “What is this?”

“An invitation! For us,” I exclaimed.

“Really? From whom, I wonder?”

As he read, a slow smile crept over Vlad’s long face. A delicate folded sheaf of paper slipped free of the envelope and fluttered to the floor. Magda quickly retrieved it and handed it to Vlad. He flipped it open and read it with an amused expression. “A Csilla, Baroness Dosza of Buda, was shocked to learn I had returned to the city without informing her. She was even more shocked to learn from Sir Stephen’s dear wife, Maria, that I had taken a wife from England. She is most anxious for us to attend her opera and is awaiting our reply.”

I snatched the letter from him without a thought and read it myself. “I think I remember her. I believe I met her at a dinner party. But who is she? How does she know about us?”

“I move in the finer circles of this city, Glynis. I am quite a mysterious figure to them. Baroness Dosza is a very beautiful, snobbish woman who must know everything that happens to anyone she deems to be in her circle of influence. I particularly intrigue her. It was a matter of time before she found out we were living in the house.” Vlad smiled with vague amusement. “Respond immediately. You do know how to write a decent letter of acceptance, do you not?”

“Of course,” I huffed, then realized what he meant. “You mean that we are actually going to attend?” I was utterly surprised. I could not believe what was happening. It was as if I was suddenly living a very normal aristocratic life. It felt so wonderfully familiar and lovely.

“Of course. And inform her that your brother and his friend will also be attending. The Baroness will be ecstatic. She adores foreigners.”

“It is in five days,” I said. “I have nothing to wear!”

“We shall take care of it. Now, write the answer immediately,” Vlad said,

kissed my brow, and strode off in good spirits.

I stared at Magda for a long moment then blinked my eyes rapidly. “Am I dreaming, Magda?”

“No, madam,” the servant assured me.

I gave out a light laugh and clutched the invitation to my heart. “Then God is truly smiling on me.”

Oh, wonders of wonders, I am truly ecstatic over this bit of news. An opera! A night of revelry! I am in heaven!

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright - Buda

15th of April, 1820

Bear with me, dear diary. I am in ecstasy! I can barely write. My hand is trembling so. So much has happened. Some of it dreadful, some of it glorious. But truly, truly, tonight was beyond all expectations.

Let me go back and explain all that happened.

Earlier -

I rushed down the stairs, a vision to behold in a confection of black and gold. True to his word, Vlad had made sure I had the finest dress to wear to the opera. Waiting at the foot of the stairs was my handsome brother and the imposing man who claims to be my husband.

As they gazed up at me, the ruddy faced redhead with the wide smile and the darkly sensual creature of the night, I could not help but notice the enormous difference between them. Andrew was alive with light and goodness while the atmosphere around Vlad was dark and menacing. But I had to admit that in their own way, they both looked very handsome in their frock coats and long trousers.

I felt radiant. Tonight I felt alive, not the undead creature I truly am. Perhaps it was the opulence of my new gown, but I felt every inch the Countess Dracula.

A delicate black veil edged with tiny gold beads fell to just below my chin and my red tresses were swept up into a fashionable knot with curls trailing down over my forehead. An elegant shimmering black feather sprang boldly over my head from a jeweled gold comb.

Vlad had spared no expense in the making of my gown for this special night and it was magnificent. The high-waisted black silk dress had puffed sleeves that slipped provocatively off my pale shoulders. It was latest style sweeping through the aristocratic circles. The dress was so stiff from all the fine embroidery and tiny, fussy details, like the gold bows encircling the padded hem of my dress, I almost felt like a walking statue.

Vlad nodded with approval as he gazed up at me. Andrew positively beamed with joy.

“You look fabulous,” Andrew declared.

I smiled behind my veil and poked him affectionately with my black feathered

fan. "You are too kind."

"My wife is exquisitely beautiful tonight," Vlad said proudly as he donned his top hat, then leaned over to kiss my lips through the veil.

This remark obviously touched Andrew deeply for he graced Vlad with one of the brightest smiles to touch his face since his arrival in Buda.

"Thank you, husband," I said, remembering my manners.

Vlad slipped into his long black cloak as I moved to help him secure it about his throat. "Where is Dr. Baum?"

"He is attending with Sir Stephen and Maria. We will meet him there," Andrew answered.

"I am so excited about tonight. I think it is going to be marvelous," I gushed with excitement.

Vlad reached out to touch the cold diamonds decorating my throat. "You will impress all of them with your grace and beauty, dear wife. You shall be the talk of the evening. Everyone will be watching you."

It was his way of telling me to be careful in word and deed. Earlier, I was firmly instructed not to reveal too much about my past. Vlad wanted us to remain slightly aloof and mysterious. Ever since we had received the invitation, Vlad had been reminding me incessantly that I was to be polite, charming and elusive. To add to my mystic, Vlad had already instructed everyone to hold their tongue about my supposed disfigurement. They were to lie tonight and say that I was still in mourning and therefore veiled according to some strange foreign mourning tradition. Andrew had nearly balked at this, but when I insisted, he had relented.

"We had best be off before we are too late," Andrew said as he helped me into my satin cloak.

Our little trio hurried out to the waiting carriage and were soon traveling the lighted streets of Buda. After a few minutes, the driver steered the horses up a particularly steep road that was lined with lush trees and fragrant flowers. I could see the windows of the palace glimmering above the tree line. As the carriage drew closer to our destination, the sounds of the merry laughter and sweet music began to waft down to us on the night breeze. I grabbed hold of Andrew's hand excitedly.

The carriage swept around a curve and I was dazzled by the brightly lit countenance of the Dosza Palace. Carriages of all sizes were pulling up to the stairs leading up to the lovely palace. Smartly uniformed men were escorting guests up the red carpet into the glittering interior.

"Oh, Vlad! Look! It is so very lovely," I cried out in awe.

Andrew laughed at my enthusiasm and smiled at Vlad. "You would think she had never been to any party before."

Vlad just smiled his dark little smile as he prepared to exit the carriage. A footman stepped up to the carriage as it rolled to a stop and his white-gloved

hand opened the door. Vlad stepped down, then reached back his hand for me. I carefully lowered myself from the carriage and nervously fluttered my fan in front of my veiled face. Staring up toward the grand entrance, I tried to calm my nerves.

“What a lovely palace,” Andrew decided with much appreciation.

“The Doszas do not want for anything,” Vlad responded with just a touch of mockery.

I tucked my hand into the crook of Vlad’s arm and began the long ascent up the red carpet. Andrew followed a few steps behind. Lively chatter, subdued laughter, and music wove together into a delightful mosaic of sound. I could feel my senses sharpening, taking in all the night offered: the sweet fragrance of the blooming flowers, the soft coolness of the wind, the noises of the party, and the extravagance of the palace.

As we entered the grand entrance, Vlad quickly whispered to a butler as I gawked at the sheer opulence that surrounded us. I almost felt blinded by the candlelight shimmering over the surfaces of marble and gold. Glancing back at Andrew, I saw him raise an eyebrow.

“Quite homey,” he whispered with a wink.

“For the King of England perhaps,” I whispered back.

“Count and Countess Dracula of Wallachia and Earl Andrew Wright of England,” the slender butler’s voice boomed out across the grand foyer.

The people milling about in the crowded foyer seemed to look up in unison. I could see the startled expressions clearly and a few looked positively nervous. I was beginning to feel very unwelcomed when suddenly a woman dressed in a bright red gown with a huge gold and red satin turban perched on her coiled black hair, hurried toward us. As she drew closer, I recognized her as someone I had met briefly during my family’s visit in Buda. She was quite lovely. Her eyes were as black as night and, when she drew near, I could see that her gaze was wise and full of cunning.

“Dearest Count Dracula, I am so glad you decided to come to my little party,” she gushed in a smooth, sensuous voice. Her eyes were positively glowing with delight.

“Baroness Dosza, it is my pleasure to be here. It has been a very long time since we last saw each other. Please let me introduce you to my wife and her brother from England, Earl Wright,” Vlad said in such a polite courtly manner it surprised me.

The Baroness smiled brightly, her teeth pearly white against her red lips. “Ah, the Countess Dracula. I am so glad to meet you, dearest. I know we shall be grand friends. Call me Csilla, dear one.”

“You may call me Glynis.”

“Glynis! What a charming name!” The Baroness was positively glowing. “It is slightly masculine, is it not,” she gushed. “Earl Wright, it is so very nice to see

that you have joined us tonight.” The Baroness turned her charms on Andrew, her eyes bright and all seeing. “I see a bit of your father in you.”

“You have met my father?” he asked in surprise.

“Oh, yes! He was a charming man and your mother was quite lovely. I meet them at a little dinner party last year when they were visiting with Sir Stephen,” the Baroness answered. “I did not meet your darling sister that evening, but I did meet her briefly at a picnic on the banks of the Danube. Do you remember that, Glynis?”

I barely acknowledged that I did when she plunged on.

“I heard that all the young men were smitten with your sisters and that they would sure to marry well. But imagine my astonishment when I heard she had captured the eye and heart of Count Dracula! We thought he would never marry!” She flashed a dazzling smile at Vlad, then said to Andrew, “And how are your dear parents?”

“I thought everyone knew,” Andrew said softly, his gaze flicking to Vlad.

“My wife’s parents and sister were killed in a carriage accident a year ago. My wife was also injured, but has now recovered,” Vlad said smoothly.

The Baroness looked horrified, her eyes widening in shock as she clutched her hands together dramatically under her chin. “How terribly dreadful, my darling Glynis! You must have been devastated!”

“We were,” Andrew responded for me, his voice quivering.

“We were not aware that such a tragedy had occurred. This is most distressing news.”

“That is why my wife dresses in mourning. In remembrance of her parents and sister,” Vlad explained. He laid a gentle hand on my arm, and I dared to glance at him briefly. His face was drawn with concern that I knew to be false.

“What a tragic figure you are, my darling. I now understand the veil!” the Baroness declared with obvious delight. I was the tragic figure that would cause a delightful amount of dramatic gossip. Perfect for her party, I suppose. “Come, come, let me introduce you to all my fine friends. I know they will adore you.” The Baroness linked her arm with mine and cast a sparkling smile at Andrew. “Come, my darlings, let me show you off to Buda’s finest. Ah, there is Baron Bartok! I must introduce him to my newest friends.”

For the next hour, I was blissful. I adore social settings and was immediately in my element as the Baroness drew me about the enormous marble hall introducing me to all the most influential people in Buda. Her introductions were glowing, a string of poetic words making even Andrew blush with modesty. I rather liked being the dramatic, tragic figure.

It was wonderfully thrilling for me to have a taste of the life I had hated, but now craved. It had once been normal for me to be dressed up in finery greeting strangers with warmth and haughtiness combined. I had stood at my mother’s side and greeted the wealthy and the aristocratic members of society on many

occasions. This was the life I had been born to and the idle small talk came naturally to me.

Andrew had picked up a smattering of Magyar during his stay and he attempted to communicate, charming many of the guests with his futile attempts. I, on the other hand, spoke flawlessly in the language of my vampire mother, Cneajna. It seemed to be a gift of the dark world of the vampires to inherit knowledge and certain aspects of your creators.

As the Baroness guided me through the maze of extravagant evening gowns and finely tailored suits, I wished sorely that I could reveal myself to these elegant people. But alas, I was held captive behind my thick veil. I struggled with the desire to rip it from my face and reveal my beauty to those around me.

Yes, yes...I can be as vain as any woman.

The Baroness fairly burst with pride as her English guests charmed the Hungarian elite.

“How lovely she is,” a man’s voice drifted above the chatter of the party.

“There you are, Emil! I wondered where you were,” Andrew called out, recognizing his friend’s voice.

The good doctor’s large frame drifted into view.

The doctor’s face broke into a wide smile and he hurried over to us.

“Andrew, we were a little late. Maria tore the hem of her dress and it had to be mended. Oh, Glynis, you look quite lovely!”

“Baroness, let me introduce you to my friend from England. Dr. Emil Baum. He traveled to Buda with me,” Andrew said by way of introduction.

The Baroness smiled graciously as she accepted Emil’s bow over her hand. “How kind of you to join us tonight.”

“Emil, this is our hostess, the Baroness Dosza,” Andrew said.

“It is a pleasure to be here, Baroness,” Emil said with a surprising charm.

The Baroness retained her bright smile, nodding her head slightly, but I could see her eyes were searching the crowd.

Vlad had disappeared from my side at some point and I could not help but wonder if it was my Master that she was looking for.

A tall, lean man approached the Baroness dressed smartly in the household uniform. He was in his late thirties and intriguingly handsome with a long, slightly craggy face. His observant dark gray eyes flickered toward me as he leaned in toward his mistress. His words were indistinct but his accent was clearly British.

The Baroness nodded her head and the man quickly disappeared into the crowd. The Baroness turned to face her guests and held out her arms, immediately gaining the attention of her guests.

“Dear friends, the opera is about to begin. Let us depart for the theater and enjoy the wondrous music of my newly discovered composer, Mihaly Mikszath!”

The Baroness whirled about and the servants flung open the doors to a long

hall that evidently led to the theater. The crowd surged forward, and I gripped Andrew's arm tightly as we were swept along.

"Where is your husband?" Andrew whispered in my ear.

I glanced about, my gaze sweeping over the wave of excited guests. The dark menacing form of my Master was nowhere to be seen. As the gaily dressed guests swept past me, I searched every face.

With a sudden shock of emotion, I realized that I was desperate to find Vlad. I felt quite alone and almost lost without him. Unbelievably, without his guiding glances, I was unsure of what to do next. A fierce anger rose up within me as I rebelled against my anxiety. I immediately made up my mind that I would not be dependent on him. I was a vampire that needed no Master.

"I do not know where he went," I finally said to my brother.

"Mayhap he crept off with Sir Stephen," Andrew ventured. "I have not seen him either. I saw Maria, but not her husband. Probably talking business at a party."

I glanced back into the crowd as a woman with a huge ornate turban moved past me. The soft feathers trailing from the silk folds slapped me in the face and I shrank away for a mere second. And in that second, Vlad suddenly appeared beside me.

"Let us go in. I should not want to keep the Baroness waiting," Vlad said. He did not bother to explain his absence.

Andrew did not seem to notice that Vlad had emerged from the very air to stand behind us and I was glad for it. I did not want Andrew to even suspect that truth about our true natures.

On the arms of my brother and Master, I entered the ornate theatre of the Dosza Palace. The guests were quickly seated in the plush high-backed chairs as a small orchestra warmed up. The Baroness spotted us and smiled delightedly. Holding up one hand, she beckoned us.

"Come, come, my darlings!"

I took in the down-scaled version of an opera house with its fine velvet draperies and ornate architecture. It was nothing compared to the opera houses I had visited in my travels across Europe, but it was quite nice in its quaintness. Obviously, the Baroness was quite pleased with her little opera company for she was in a state of great excitement.

There were no grand balconies for the elite to sit in high above the lesser peoples. Instead, the Baroness had a section in the front set apart for herself and her honored guests. It was here that Vlad led my brother and me. We were seated in the most wonderfully ornate and comfortable chairs and I set my fan on my lap. Sitting between my brother and Vlad, I watched with keen interest as the Baroness took the chair next to Vlad.

Leaning across my husband, she whispered breathlessly to me, "You will love this opera, my darling. It is the life of Vlad Tepes."

My eyes narrowed beneath my veil as I glanced quickly at Vlad. Just what did the Baroness know of him? He sat beside me, stoically staring up at the darkened stage. The servants were busy extinguishing some of the candles for a darker atmosphere. I reached out and touched Vlad's hand. He looked at me, smiling slightly. Covering my hand with his other hand, I knew he would give me no answers.

With great flourish, the composer stepped forward to describe his masterpiece. He was a small man with a very large head and hands. His eyes were too small, his nose far too large, and he seemed to almost spit his words out as he spoke. Obviously nervous, he hesitated in mid-sentence, only to repeat what he had already said.

"This opera is about...my opera...is about Vlad Tepes," he started in a trembling voice. He cleared his throat and seemed to concentrate on enunciating every word as carefully as possible. "Vlad Tepes was a great man...a great man...in his time...a great man..."

My gaze slid toward Vlad and I saw that he was not only amused, but also incredibly pleased. As the composer forced his words out, explaining that Vlad Tepes had helped force the Turks out of Europe, Vlad nearly glowed with pride.

"And tonight...this night...among us...is another great man...among us...a descendent of a great man...Vlad Tepes...Count Vlad Dracula."

The Baroness stood up quickly, cutting off her fumbling musician. "I wish to dedicate this wonderful opera to my dear friends, Count and Countess Dracula of Wallachia."

There was a polite smattering of applause and the Baroness beamed with joy, her gaze falling to Vlad. He returned her smile with his own darkly sensual one.

Mihjaly Mikszath bowed and turned toward the orchestra awaiting his cue. Flamboyantly, Mihaly lifted his thin arms and the musicians straightened in their chairs. With the suddenly movement of his arms, the music swelled up in a dark wave.

It was the longest two hours of my vampire life. The opera was horrible. The music was overwrought and jolting. The notes seemed to assault my ears and jar me to vivid wakefulness if I dared to begin to doze off out of boredom. I am quite sure not one person dozed, not even in the back row. The opera singers were good enough, but the music did them no favors. The set was dark, brooding, and tasteless. I especially thought the backdrop of thousands of impaled Turks were far too vivid and grotesque.

The story was simple enough. Vlad was sent as a child by his father to be hostage to the Turks and was forced to endure terrible suffering until he finally made his way home to begin to fight for the freedom of his kingdom. He had suffered from betrayal after betrayal and he was merciless to his enemies. There was a small scene that was supposed to be a love story, but Cneajna had told me the truth. I knew that Vlad's mortal wife, Ilona, had never held his passion. In

the end, Mihaly tried to create a happy ending. Vlad was supposedly beheaded offstage as the music reached an ear piercing crescendo. Then, much to my horror, when the actor portraying Vlad emerged from behind the curtains, he was clad as a saint. As the music soared dramatically, the actor climbed up on a set of narrow stairs to what was supposed to be heaven. Two very bored looking women stood dressed as angels waiting for him at the pearly gates. As they took the actor playing Vlad into their arms and the curtain fell, I could barely hear Vlad chortling under his breath.

To my surprise, the room erupted into applause. The Baroness moved to clutch my hand tightly and gave me an enthusiastic smile. "It was magnificent, was it not?"

I looked toward Andrew, who raised an eyebrow at me. He was obviously just as unimpressed as I was. As the guests rose up into a standing ovation, my brother and I reluctantly joined in. We were both on the verge of hysterical laughter and it took all our willpower to maintain our composure.

Vlad was positively radiant over the whole production. I thought he was far too obvious with his brilliant smile and triumphant expression.

I whispered in his ear, "You are supposed to be your own descendent, remember?"

"Vlad took my hand, kissed it, and whispered back, "And as his descendent, I am a proud man."

I rolled my eyes beneath my veil. "You were a butcher."

Vlad grinned, flashing his deadly, white canine teeth. "I was a hero."

The Baroness made a great show of praising her awkward composer and called the opera company onto the stage. The Baroness swept toward me and before I could even react, the Baroness led me up the steps to the stage. Vlad followed, along with Andrew. I found myself confronted with a receiving line of all the performers and I raised my eyebrows beneath my veil. I felt rather like royalty.

For nearly thirty minutes, I greeted all the opera performers, the musicians, countless stagehands and finally the composer himself. From the reek, it was obvious he had rushed back stage to calm his nerves with a bit of liquor.

"Countess Dracula, it means so much...so much...to me for you to be here...so much," Mihaly said breathlessly, and then kissed my gloved hand over and over again.

"You do very interesting work, sir," I responded.

"Thank you, thank you!"

"I enjoyed it tremendously. You really captured the essence of the man that was Vlad Tepes," Vlad said to the trembling man.

Mihaly gulped visibly as his hand began to shake even more. "Sir, my mother was from Wallachia and my family has told stories of Vlad Tepes for generations. To meet his descendent is the greatest of honors."

“He actually completed a sentence,” Andrew whispered in my ear.

I hit him with my fan.

The Baroness took Vlad’s arm and I noted a certain possessiveness in the Baroness’ eyes. Andrew was busy trying to find a way to escape and was oblivious to the subtle change in the atmosphere. I felt a chill flow over me. The Baroness spoke in excited melodic tones, but I could see how her gaze continually flicked toward Vlad.

Coyly, I took Vlad’s arm, drawing him to me. “She knows about you, does she not?”

Vlad lightly kissed my lips through my veil and whispered to me, “Do as you were told. Go mingle.” His eyes were dark and warning.

I raised my chin, drew away, and went to my brother.

It was just the beginning of a very eventful night.

Chapter 28

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright – Continued

After the opera there was a wonderful spread of food, that I pretended to eat from, as well as lots of laughter and dancing.

“Oh, the Baroness’ parties always last until dawn. I believe she abhors the daylight,” a woman said as we sat side by side watching the dancers in the ballroom.

“Truly? I assume there is no Baron or is he out of town?”

“The Baroness has been a widow since one month after she married. Her husband died suddenly and left her all his wealth. She has never bothered to remarry, even though many a man has tried to woo her,” the woman with the bright canary turban responded snidely, innuendo dripping from her voice.

“It must be difficult to live alone,” I said lightly.

“I am sure it is,” the woman responded with a coy smile.

As the night moved on in glorious fashion, not one guest seemed interested in departing. There was much food, drink, dancing, and lively conversation. I drifted about the room for a time on Vlad’s arm, recounting our fabricated tale of my family’s demise and his heroic rescue of me from the river. We explained the veil away by the excuse of my mourning. It was a dramatic story that enthralled all who listened to it. After awhile, the gossips were recounting my tale throughout the party.

Vlad soon left my side to speak with Sir Stephen. I noticed that my family’s betrayer stayed far away from me, which was rather wise. I was feeling a bit agitated. As ridiculous as it may sound, I was very much annoyed by the Baroness’ possessive behavior toward Vlad. His attention toward her did not just feel like a betrayal of me, but of my vampire sisters as well.

By the furtive glances and the many whispered conversations taking place all around me, I knew I was the main topic of conversation. I cut a mysterious figure in my black gown and lace veil, and I quite enjoyed all the attention.

The dancing was festive and the conversations boisterous. I moved through the outer edges of the dance floor, dropping in to chat with the different groups of guests. Andrew and Dr. Baum were well on their way to getting very inebriated with a group of men at the far corner of the room, the thick smoke from their cigars hovering lazily over their heads.

I slipped into the shadows behind a marble pillar and stood watching the gay dancing of the younger guests. To my disgust, Vlad had disappeared with the Baroness. I had not noticed, until the shock of their disappearance had reverberated throughout the room. Everyone obviously believed that the Baroness was Vlad's mistress. I was beginning to believe it myself. I also began to wonder if the Baroness was a vampire, but I was undecided. The Baroness was beautiful, but lacked that special aura of a vampire. Of course, if she was a very young vampire and not very strong, perhaps she would appear more human.

I heard Maria's gay laughter nearby. "Oh, please do not say such things. Count Dracula departed with my husband and the Baroness to discuss business."

At this, I pouted a bit. Vlad could have at least pretended to be a faithful husband by not causing such a ruckus, but Maria seemed to be doing her best at diffusing any titillating rumors.

I felt a chill pierce through my body, and I looked about curiously. I sensed someone was watching me and my flesh prickled in response. No one stood near me in the shadows, so my gaze swept over the lighted room. Leaning against the cold marble of the pillar, I attempted to discreetly search out the new presence that seemed to be growing in the room.

The party was still in full swing, loud laughter echoing throughout the room as the orchestra played on. The women in their stiff, ornate gowns glided over the marble floor on the arms of their well groomed partners, swinging first this way then that. I studied every face and shadow, searching desperately for the dark power that had suddenly made itself known.

To my growing sense of horror, I felt the power near my brother. I moved out of the shadows and along the edges of the dance floor. I could almost feel it drawing me in, pulling me closer. My brother's back was to me and Dr. Baum was seated near him, laughing affably. Moving just a little faster, I drew close to my brother and reached out to touch his arm.

It was then I saw him.

Seated in the corner in a comfortable chair, Ignatius looked up at me and smiled. He was clad all in black, his long hair falling around his face. I blinked, startled, as I realized he was wearing the long coat of a priest.

"Oh, Glynis, I am so glad you are here. You must meet Father Ignatius. He has traveled all of Europe and has even been to our quaint little town," Andrew

said with a wide grin.

Ignatius rose smoothly to his feet and reached out his hand in greeting. “I have heard much about you, Countess Dracula. You are the talk of the ball.”

“Father Ignatius, a pleasure,” I said, probably sounding far too startled.

Ignatius took my hand, bowing over it. “The pleasure is mine.”

“The Father was telling us about his research into folklore and it is fascinating. He was telling us of something called a vampire. Did you not read a story by Lord Byron about such a creature?” Andrew asked me.

“Yes, yes. But it was actually Polidori who wrote it,” I answered. I felt disconcerted and completely at a loss as to how to act. I was sure I was acting quite ridiculous. I was glad for my veil or else they would have seen my utter astonishment.

“Oh, yes, John Polidori. That half-Italian chap who hangs out with that scoundrel Bryon,” Emil said. His nose was so red, I was quite sure he need not drink more.

Ignatius was just as handsome as I remembered with his long raven hair and intense dark blue eyes. He smiled kindly, but his eyes were slightly wicked as he gazed at me. I instantly desired him as much as I ever had, despite his façade as a priest.

Is it possible that no one else felt the fire that burned between us? Evidently not, because the conversation continued around us.

“It was a gruesome tale,” I said softly.

“Was it? I never read it,” Andrew said and took another sip of his wine.

“You know the rubbish they publish these days is geared toward the more foolish, uneducated minds,” Dr. Baum declared, waving his cigar about.

“I disagree. I rather think it is aimed toward those aspects of human nature that we tend not to embrace,” Ignatius responded. “We are not privy to each other’s deepest thoughts. Our fears, our desires, our passions.” He gazed solemnly at me as he said these things, his expression quite thoughtful.

“Ah, yes, the human mind is quite complex. We are always far too ready to divulge in idle gossip or retell the most lurid stories,” Dr. Baum agreed. “But, as a priest, surely you believe we should shy away from such things.”

“As a priest, I think we should not lie about our true natures,” Ignatius answered with a wry smile. “Do you not agree, Countess Dracula?”

I frowned at him from behind my veil, but managed to keep my tone light. “Oh, we should not lie about our true natures, but I really do not think we should expose all our deepest secrets to those around us. There is something to be said about discretion.”

“Should we not acknowledge our true natures, then try our very best to make better men of ourselves?” Andrew said.

“Better men and women,” Ignatius said. “Do not discount the power of a woman. They carry much more weight in the lives of men than we give them

credit for.”

I laughed at this. “Well, I cannot disagree with that.”

“I am sure you are an intricate part of your husband’s life,” Ignatius said to me. “Do you not feel by embracing who you are, you are a more powerful helpmate?”

I remember that I had thought him rather far too clever. He was trying to draw out information about me.

“I try to be what he needs me to be,” I answered with a wave of my fan.

“My sister is a devout and good wife to Count Dracula. The man is absolutely terrifying, yet she is loyal and loving,” Andrew said with great emotion.

He was quite drunk, I could see now.

“And that she has endured all that she has and continues to be the light she always was in my life speaks volumes,” Andrew continued.

“Yes, I heard of the terrible tragedy of your family,” Ignatius said softly. “I am glad that your husband was able to recover you from the wreckage.”

I frowned at him behind my lace veil and almost stomped my foot at him. He seemed to love saying the word “husband” over and over again. Most likely to peeve me.

“I cannot remember too much of that time,” I said briskly.

“No, no, of course not,” he answered. “It was a great tragedy.”

“Greater than you know,” I said, my fan fluttering quite quickly before me. I was nervous, yet I wanted to be alone with him.

“My sister is a good and brave woman,” Andrew said firmly.

“Here, here,” Dr. Emil said, toasting me. “A good fine Englishwoman. May you soon return home.”

“But are you not home? Is not Buda your home now?”

Ignatius definitely was trying to procure too much information.

“Buda is my home,” I said quickly. “But England is my heart’s home.”

“Ah, there is Sir Stephen,” Dr. Baum said standing and swaying slightly. “Stephen, Stephen, over here!”

I looked sharply toward the man whose name made my still heart clench. He moved toward us slowly, winding his way through the crowd of guests. I could see he was nervous and I wondered where Vlad was.

“Stephen, you must meet Father Ignatius,” Dr. Baum said as Stephen joined us.

“Father Ignatius?” Stephen asked in confusion.

It was then my brother, Dr. Baum, and I, all realized that Ignatius was no longer among us.

“Oh, he must have slipped away,” Dr. Baum said with some consternation.

Andrew finished his drink and signaled for another. “We are far too drunk to be very observant, Emil.”

“True, true,” Dr. Baum said with a great laugh.

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” I said, then slipped away into the crowd.

I could feel Ignatius' power still in the room. Moving in its wake, I tried to seek him out. My gaze swept back and forth, but he was nowhere to be seen. I was drawn to a door on the far end of the ballroom hidden behind the huge marble pillars that lined the room like sentinels. Hesitating, I laid my hand on the doorknob.

I entered.

The room was utterly dark. When I shut the door behind me, only the moonlight slipping through the curtains gave any illumination. I blinked a few times, then I could see a bit better. I was in need of blood and my vision was poor. Slowly, I realized he was seated in the corner of the room in a chair.

Moving toward him, I suddenly stopped. He was deliberately keeping his face shrouded, but I could plainly see his pale white hands on the arms of the chair.

“You...you...” I stammered. “You were in Bistrița ! You followed me here!”

“Truly, I was only trying to converse with a lovely young woman after a long journey,” he answered.

“Nonsense! You followed me to Buda. Who are you?”

“Father Ignatius,” he answered, standing up slowly, letting the shadows fall from his face.

“Liar,” I answered.

“Are we not both liars?” he said with a smile, then caught my wrist, drawing me near. “Why the veil, Countess Dracula?”

“Why the cassock?” I tried to pull away, but he was stronger. He was warm from feeding.

“Are you scarred? Did the hunters hurt you? Or your husband harm you?” He reached for the veil as I pulled back. “Tell me, dearest Glynis...or shall I say Countess...why is your face covered? Are you truly mourning your family?”

Despite my absolute desire to kiss him, I was angry with him, so I fought him and tried to draw away once more. He pulled me about and pulled back the veil.

“Your face is whole,” he whispered, and I realized he was quite relieved.

I was going to make a flippant remark, but he kissed me, passionately, desperately, and all words were lost as I responded.

Finally, his lips left mine and he said softly, “I feared the worst when you did not come to me that night.”

“I could not. My brother is in town and Vlad...”

“Your husband-“

“My Master. He merely calls me his wife. Vlad would have suspected me that night if I had canceled my brother's visit.”

“You could have sent notice,” Ignatius said reproachfully.

“No, I could not. I do not trust my servants. They are in league with my

Master.”

“So you do not love him?”

“I despise him. I play this charade to keep my brother alive. There is much you do not understand and I have not the time to tell you. But it is true my family is dead save Andrew. And I will do what I must to keep him safe.”

“So your family did die at Bârgău Pass?”

“No,” I shook my head, my eyes filling with tears. “No, he killed them.”

Ignatius pulled me tight against him, his fingers stroking the nape of my neck. “I am terribly sorry, Glynis. For a moment, I was not sure what to believe of you.”

“I cannot tell you of all that I have endured. Even now I fear that Vlad may find us and realize the depths of my betrayal.” My voice was but a mere whisper. Tears caught in my lashes.

Ignatius leaned down to kiss me softly. “I am saddened by your predicament and wish to save you from it.”

I looked up at him as I said in a tremulous voice, “But how? He is powerful and cruel. He holds me to him by his blood in my veins. I am but a pawn in his game and so is my brother. The web in which I am entangled threatens all I love. Even you now.”

He looked thoughtful, his expression quite distant. His hand stilled against my neck. At last, he said, “I am at a loss. All I know is that in this moment I wish nothing more than to take you with me.”

“Tell me you are stronger than Vlad and that you could crush him and I will go with you.” I knew his answer before he spoke, but I had wished to hear other words.

“It is more complicated than that. Your Master has woven a greater web than you realize.” He sighed softly. “I am restricted by that which I cannot explain to you.”

“You do not trust me?”

“You are Vlad’s child. You know what he can do to make you do as he desires. He must not even know I am here.” Ignatius sighed wearily, then sat down on the arm of a chair. His hands rested on my waist as he gazed up at me. “You would be truly the most complicated creature I have ever met, in personality and circumstances. And I, of course, would have to fall madly for you.”

I could not help but smile at this. “I am rather much, am I not?”

“Exactly,” Ignatius laughed. He grew somber and pulled me close to him. Resting his head against my bosom, he whispered, “I would take you with me in this moment if I could. We shall find a way to free you of Vlad. I swear it.”

Sliding my hands up to cup his face, I kissed him. “I wish to be with you. Free of him.”

Laying his hands over mine, he whispered back, “And you will be.”

We kissed a chaste kiss despite our passion for each other.

“I am saddened by your status, yet enthralled to be with you,” Ignatius said, standing to take me fully into his arms.

“I dreamed of seeing you again and it gave me hope,” I confessed. “I wanted desperately to come to you.”

“I understand now. Do not worry yourself about that,” Ignatius smiled wryly. “I must confess, I came here tonight seeking you. I saw you in passing, in the carriage with Vlad, coming here. I could not see your face, but I felt your presence. And I had to know if you were all I believed you to be.”

I was hurt by his words.

He touched my face to console me. “I know who Vlad is. I know what he is capable of. I had a moment of sheer panic, I admit to that.”

How could I not forgive him?

I kissed him and felt our passions growing. I knew, in that moment, all I wanted was to flee into the night with Ignatius and risk Vlad’s wrath.

Ignatius suddenly withdrew. “Someone approaches.”

The doors to the balcony slammed open and the chill night wind howled into the room.

I heard the door open behind me.

As quickly as the wind had rose up, it dissipated, leaving me standing alone before the open doorway staring up at the night sky. My arms were empty and my lips felt naked as the cool breeze brushed against them.

Ignatius was gone.

“Countess Dracula, I have been searching for you,” a very prim and British voice said from behind me.

I turned around to see a tall man framed in the doorway. It was the servant who had spoken with the Baroness earlier. I recognized his rugged handsome face instantly and I smiled at him.

His face went slack and his eyes widened.

It was then I remembered my veil. Reaching up, I drew it down over my features quickly.

“Madam, forgive me! I am so sorry to interrupt your...moment alone.”

“There is nothing to forgive,” I answered quickly. “But, why were you searching for me?”

He stepped tentatively into the room, his eyes darting about, searching the shadows.

I was certain he had seen Ignatius vanish.

“My name is Brice, Madam. I am also from Great Britain. When I saw you last year, madam, I knew you were in danger, but I could not warn you. Forgive me, but it was already too late. But tonight, I can warn you. Your husband is a most evil vile man and my mistress is his faithful servant. Even now, she caters to his every wish.”

I was so shocked by the servant's bluntness, I could not think of what to say. "Forgive me, please," he said in a voice that was desperate and yet reserved.

"You saw me when I was here last year?"

"Yes, Madam. I was at my mistress' side when she greeted you on the banks of the Danube. There were a great many people there that afternoon, so I am not surprised you do not recognize me. I attempted to speak with your father, but I was thwarted."

I felt chilled to the bone and whispered, "What do you know? Of my...husband?"

"That he is not human. That you and he are what the Baroness yearns to be. It is all she desires. To live forever."

I was stunned at his words. "And why, pray tell, are you telling me all this? Do you not fear me?"

"No, I do not. I have seen how you are still a sweet young woman with your brother tonight. I know that you may be changed into something other than human, but you are still the spirited young woman I saw last spring. I saw it in your smile when I entered the room. Honestly, madam, I have seen things so horrible here, I cannot bear it. I came here from England to have a good life, instead it has been just shy of hell. The Baroness is an evil woman and your family is not the only one she has conspired against."

"What do you mean? What do you know?" I demanded.

"I know you were trapped into this fate, Madam. I know what they did to you and your family. That you are but a victim of an evil plot against you."

I felt my rage growing and fought to draw it in, suppress it. "You are saying the Baroness had something to do with the fate of my family?"

"Come with me, madam. I will show you. Please, come with me." Brice held out his hand to me, imploring me with an expression both sorrowful and anxious.

"Very well. Show me what you must," I responded.

I admit as I write this I am still quite mystified by my newly acquired ally. As I walked behind him, staring at his stiffly held frame, I could only wonder at his motives. Of course, it was such a strange evening from the very beginning, and at that time I suspected it would be to the very end, that I could only follow this man who promised me a clearer portrait of the truth. It was a night of revelations and my curiosity spurred me to discover what more might be unveiled.

I followed Brice through darkened hallways to the gloomy domain of the servants. He motioned to me and we brushed past the house servants that were still on duty. One maid was seated on the bottom steps of the servants' staircase her head slumped to one side as she dozed off from exhaustion. I stepped gingerly around her and moved up into the dreary shadows above her.

Brice motioned to me and pushed open a doorway. Beyond it, lay a long narrow hall.

“What is this?”

“The Baroness is a peculiar woman. She likes to know everything that happens within her household.” He hesitated, for emphasis. “I do mean everything.”

“She spies on her own guests,” I asked in surprise.

“You could say that. Come along.”

The hall was extremely narrow and I could feel my dress brushing against the walls on either side of me. Tiny little slots were in the walls at various points. Nervously, I avoided looking through them and followed Brice closely.

I drew my power tight around me, shielding myself from Vlad or the Baroness, should she be a vampire. I must have vanished from sight, for Brice looked back down the hallway with confusion. I reached out to touch him and he looked quite startled.

“Madam, that was quite terrifying,” he said in a low voice.

“I apologize,” I said briskly, trying not to vanish from his view again.

He took a few more steps, then motioned. “Here. They are in here,” he whispered softly.

I moved closer to him. Turning my head, I peered through the tiny slot. Slowly, my eyes adjusted to the candlelight beyond and I could see into the dark cavernous room that was the Baroness’ bedroom.

A woman, very young and beautiful lay on a table, her eyes wide and unseeing. She was pale and lifeless, her throat and wrists baring the marks of a vampire’s bite. The Baroness languidly lounged on her bed, watching Vlad as he spoke with her. The curtains in the windows rustled as the night air flowed through the room causing the candles to flicker, throwing ghastly shadows along the walls.

Vlad’s fingers trailed over the Baroness’ cheek as he smiled down at her, his teeth still tinged with blood. “Good things come to those who wait.”

“I do not wish to wait,” the Baroness pouted. “But if that is what you desire...so be it.”

“It is what I desire,” Vlad assured her.

The Baroness sighed, then slid from the bed. She wandered across the room to the dead girl and smiled down at her with contentment. “And when will I join you, my love?”

“When the time is right.” Vlad fell back against the pillows on her bed, looking quite flushed and content.

“It pains me to see you with her,” the Baroness said in a low voice.

Vlad’s eyes narrowed, but she did not notice.

In the tiny hallway, I pressed closer to the slot, trying to see all that was happening, yet pulling my power in tighter around me.

“I know I chose her for you, but it hurts me that she is immortal and I am not.”

“I chose her,” Vlad said in a voice that was edged with anger. “You may have directed my attentions toward her, but I alone chose her.”

“Forgive me,” the Baroness said with a winsome smile. “I spoke hastily.”

“You know I need her. I wish to move to England and I need her to establish a mortal life there. Glynis can give me the life of a mortal man,” Vlad reminded her.

“I long to be what she is,” the Baroness whispered. Her fingers trailed through the thick blood congealing on the table and pressed them to her lips. “I wish to take life as you do and make it my own.”

Vlad was growing restless and he moved swiftly across the room. Taking the Baroness’ face roughly in his hands, he said softly, “You directed my eyes to Glynis. You told me she was the most perfect of all the English noblewomen in Buda. You told me how beautiful she was. How lovely. And when I saw her, I wanted her. You helped Stephen convince her parents to come to me. You gave her to me. Do not start resenting her. In the end, you will be her sister and my Bride. You will be with her forever.”

The Baroness lowered her eyes. “I long for the day. To be your favored Bride and love.”

Vlad laughed, kissed her roughly then threw her to the ground. “Glynis is the first among my Brides. You will serve her. Do not forget that.”

I drew in a breath in shock. He named me the first. Not Cneajna. He had said this once before, but I thought it idle flattery, a bribe to gain my devotion. But he said the words now in all sincerity. My mind whirled at the concept, of the possibilities. What did it mean?

I still reel at the thought.

The Baroness lay on the floor in silence, her eyes welling with tears. “You love her!”

Vlad merely smirked. “I need to go to my wife. The night is drawing to an end. She will wonder where I am. As will my brother in law. I will see you another night,” Vlad said to her.

“You love her!” The Baroness voice rose angrily. “You love her!”

I could not stand there and wait for Vlad to respond. I grabbed Brice’s hand and hurried us both down the passage. Vlad would be seeking me out soon and I knew the Baroness’ tirade would not last long with his temper.

“Do you understand now? All she speaks of since she discovered you had come to Buda is you. She is obsessed.”

“Yes, I understand too well. Your mistress conspired against me and my family,” I nearly growled. “Damn her!”

“She yearns to be what you are,” Brice said, his gray eyes tormented with sadness.

“And Vlad has promised her. I will kill her first. She will never join us,” I vowed through clenched teeth.

“Do what you must, but I beg of you one thing,” Brice said as we reached the darkened hallway leading to the ballroom.

I whirled about and stared into his craggy face. “What do you desire?”

“When you are free of him, you will come for me. Let me go back with you to England.” His voice was filled with great yearning and sadness.

“Very well,” I answered him. “I will not forget what you have revealed this night and I will come for you. You will go home to England. I vow it.” Then I turned to hurry down the hallway to the ballroom.

Vlad met me at the doorway, both of us reaching it at the same moment. He was so flushed with blood that he looked human. He grabbed hold of my arm, pulled me back away from the doorway behind a curtain, and kissed me deeply through my veil. I could taste the blood on his lips and teeth and my hunger responded to his kiss. With passion and hunger, I kissed him, holding tight to him.

He released me and tucked my veil back into place. “Sometimes I forget that there are more annoying women than you on this earth.”

I lifted my chin and said, “A fight with your mistress?”

Laughing, he swung me about in a little dance, then pulled me against him. “Choices have been made this night that will liberate you in ways you cannot imagine.”

“Tell me?”

With a smirk, he released me, took my hand, kissed it, and then shook his head. “No.”

He led me into the ballroom and all that followed held no meaning.

Now I sit at my desk in my room, the sun threatening to appear in a few minutes. Vlad is already at rest. As I write all this down, I realize that Vlad and I are entangled in a game of which I do not understand the rules. The Baroness accused him of loving me, but I do not think he loves. In me he has found an adversary and compatriot. We are both headstrong and somewhat ruthless. Tonight, I am beginning to believe we may be evenly matched.

Vlad is consumed with his plans and now I must be consumed in my own. I cannot merely wait to see what happens. I must make my own freedom appear. I must fight for it.

Tonight I watched the men I love converse together before me. They are both worth fighting for. I am worth fighting for. I must fulfill my mother’s dying wish. I must begin now to truly plan my escape from Vlad.

Chapter 29

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright- Buda

20th of April, 1820

This was my last night to spend with my brother-
Earlier-

I mournfully watched the moonbeams from the moon above skip merrily over the dark waters of the Danube. Sighing heavily, I tucked my hand into my brother's, leaning against him to seek comfort.

We stood side by side staring over the waters toward Pesh. For almost a month, we had strolled along this same bank every night speaking of the life we had once shared and tentatively planning for the future. But, alas, this was Andrew's last night in Buda.

Andrew wrapped his arms about me. "It will be all right, Glynis. You shall see. I will help your husband make plans for your move and soon you will be sipping tea with Angeline and playing with Johnny. You will be in England soon, Glynis and we will be together once more. Do not fret."

"I am trying not to, but England seems so far away," I sighed.

"Yes, but you shall soon be home. I swear it. You shall reclaim your life and one day we shall sit and watch our children play together."

His words caused me pain, but I tried to hide it. I would never have mortal children, but my brother did not realize that. My children, should I ever create any, would be undead and deadly just as I am. "I am going to miss you so, Andrew. You have made me so very happy this last month."

"Here I have been feeling like a terrible nuisance," Andrew answered with a wry grin.

"Well, yes, that as well, but always a wonderful nuisance," I teased him. I drew back and held onto his hand, pulling him along behind me.

"I cannot wait until you are safely relocated to England then we shall all be together until death parts us," he decided.

I could feel the tears in my eyes and I desperately tried to keep them from falling. "I will never forget this time we had together, Andrew. It has meant the world to me."

"Do not speak of it as if I am never going to see you again, Glynis. We shall be together once more, and we will all be quite happy. I am merely returning to England to clear the way for you to come with your husband. Then the family will be reunited and we shall be together."

I could not help but be maudlin. Andrew does not understand the world I now live within. He has made me human again. He has restored my faith in life and God. At the same time, he has spurred me into a desperate and enormous decision. I will kill Vlad and escape. As soon as possible, I will do it.

Andrew's thoughts were of his travels home, his dear wife and infant son, and belief that I would soon join him in England. All the while my thoughts were of darkness and murder. But my mind is quite made up. I will kill Vlad before we ever leave Buda, for once in England Vlad will wield great power over me. His

threats against my brother would carry extra weight once we are on British soil. To save Andrew, I know I have to kill Vlad while he is still in Eastern Europe. I am unsure of the consequences of my actions, but I have to fulfill my promise to my mother. I will be free of Vlad.

Clutching Andrew's hand tightly, I strolled along in silence. I tried to put on a gay exterior, but still, I could not help but wonder when I would ever see my beloved brother again, if at all.

We made our way back to the home of Sir Stephen in awkward silence. The tension grew between us. Andrew was thrilled to be leaving for home, yet torn because he was leaving me behind. I was relieved that he would soon be far away from Vlad, but I could not help but feel a heavy sadness at the reality of his departure.

"It will be odd trying to live like a normal man once more. I have become accustomed to being awake all night during my visit here," Andrew mused.

"I am sorry for that. But I cannot bear the sunlight," I answered truthfully.

"I know and I understand. I know that is why you will not see me off in the morning, and I do not hold it against you. You being here now is sufficient in every way."

I smiled ruefully and turned my face into the wind, feeling the cool breeze slipping beneath my veil and drying my silent tears. As we moved up the stone steps that lead into the home of Sir Stephen, Andrew gave my shoulders a tender squeeze as he smiled at me lovingly.

"I love you, dear sister," he said.

"I love you, dear brother," I answered.

Together we entered the house. Vlad was waiting for us with Doctor Baum in the sitting room. I saw his foot tapping restlessly and a bored expression upon his features. I knew instantly that he was desperate to leave. Sir Stephen hesitantly entered the room and sought out his Master's gaze. Vlad motioned him to a chair and Stephen quickly sat down.

"Are you tired, Glynis? I know the party last night was quite a strain on you," Vlad said evenly, his gaze piercing.

"Actually, dear husband, I am quite tired," I answered him. I longed to stay longer, but Vlad was clearly quite anxious to leave.

"So soon, dear lady?" Dr. Baum looked surprised. He was used to me being awake until nearly dawn.

"I am feeling a bit faint and you two should really rest before your trip tomorrow," I said smoothly.

"Mayhap it is best to say our goodbyes now," Andrew conceded.

"Thank you for understanding," I said softly. Oh, how I am going to miss him. He has brought me so much happiness during his time in Buda.

Vlad rose majestically to his feet and moved to escort me to the foyer. Andrew took hold of my other hand and clasped it tightly, joining us as we

walked together. A servant opened the front door and Vlad stepped out into the night, looking back upon us.

Before he could say anything, I turned to Andrew and flung my arms about him. "I am going to miss you dreadfully!"

"And I you. But we shall soon be together," Andrew responded and hugged me tenderly.

Dr. Baum followed us out onto the front steps and I turned to him. I kissed him on both cheeks and felt a pang of guilt for what I had done to him.

"Thank you so much for accompanying my brother on his visit here," I said.

"It was a pleasure, Countess. It truly was. And we shall see each other again very soon," he answered with a cheery smile.

Vlad moved forward and politely shook both men's hands, but made no pretense of a sad farewell. He seemed almost relieved. "We shall all see each other soon enough. It was a pleasure gentlemen."

"Take care of my sister," Andrew urged Vlad with one of his bright smiles. "I know she is quite a handful."

Vlad smiled, looking at me. "Yes, she is. But you can rest easy, Andrew. I shall make sure she is well taken care of."

I once more embraced my brother and kissed both of his cheeks. "I love you, Andrew. May you be blessed with a safe journey home. Give Angeline and Johnny a kiss for me."

"I shall. Be happy, Glynis and write me often until you return home." He was being very brave for me and I loved him for it. He kissed my forehead then helped me into our carriage.

I reluctantly released his hand and sat back beside my Master. As the carriage lurched forward and drew us away from my brother and his friend, I lowered my head and wept.

"Do not be such a child, Glynis," Vlad scolded me. "We shall see him again. I promise you that."

I turned my face away from him and cried into the soft folds of my veil.

When we returned to our home, I snatched off the veil and shredded it to pieces. With an angry scream, I flung the pieces at Vlad and raced up the stairs to my room. He followed slowly, but with an amused expression upon his features. When he entered my room, he found me ripping apart all my veils in a wild frenzy.

"Now what is the use of that?" he asked.

"I do not need them anymore, do I?" I flung a bit of black lace at him and it drifted lazily to his feet.

"You are angry, I take it," he decided.

"Truly you are so very observant, husband," I said smartly.

"Why are you angry? Because you were reunited with your brother? Because I brought you to live in this lovely home? Or because you have been

treated as a Countess for over a month's time?" Vlad's eyes narrowed, the green in them seeming to glow.

"No," I said indignantly. "I am hungry." I pouted and slumped down onto the floor, my skirts rising up around me like a blue silk cloud.

He laughed and shook his head, his long auburn coils falling around his narrow, lupine features. "You are so very spoiled."

I stomped my foot on the floor. "I am hungry!"

Amazingly, he did not seem very angry for my outburst. He squatted down before me and tilted his head to regard me. "Then go eat. Find a nice young man to seduce in his bed and feast."

I flicked my gaze upwards to regard him suspiciously. "Truly?"

"Truly." He reached out and ran his fingers lightly down my cheek. "Feed and renew yourself. But be mindful of the hunters."

I was unnerved by his gesture. I could not help but think of his words to the Baroness and her words to him.

He drew me to him and kissed me deeply. I remained limp in his arms, not responding. He licked my lips then turned my head and bit into my throat. I could not help but swoon and fell back in his arms. He lowered me to the floor and drank just a little from me.

I felt the hunger grow fierce in my belly.

"Go and feed your beast. Feed it well. Remember that you are more than Lady Glynis of England, but a vampire and my Bride."

I could taste my blood on his lips when he kissed me again, and I boldly bit his lip and took a bit of his blood into me. He crushed me to him and let me drink just a little then pulled free. Climbing to his feet, he motioned to me. "Go feed and return before sunrise. And do not fret over your brother. In a year's time he shall be a part of our life and we a part of his."

I rose to my feet and he traced his fingers over the healing wound on my throat.

"Did you even like my brother?"

Vlad laughed and walked to the door slowly. "He was much like you, dear Glynis. How could I help but not like him. He will be a worthy servant and ally." And with that, he was gone.

His words angered me and hung in the air like a threat. Whether he meant it to be or not, his prediction of my brother's fate in our lives terrified me. I could not bear the thought of Vlad wielding power over Andrew. Fighting down my fear and anger, I quickly formed a plan in my mind.

With quivering, desperate hands, I pulled on the fastenings of my dress and climbed out of the layers of blue silk. I quickly donned a frothy black gown that made me even more pale and striking. It was very lightweight and would allow me to move quickly, without restraint. I combed out my fussy hairstyle and allowed my long hair to hang down to my waist in gentle waves. Finally, I

pulled off all my ornate jewelry; save the ruby ring Vlad had given me.

As I hurried from my bedroom, I wrapped a long black cloak around my shoulders and drew the hood over my long unfettered hair. Then I fled into the night, determined to save my brother.

The Journal of Andrew Wright

20th of April, 1820

I had the most frightful nightmare just now. I awoke with a start and I find I cannot return to sleep until I have written down what I saw in the dark world of dreams.

In the dream, I saw a drunken butcher staggering down the street, his bleary red eyes squinting through the thick fog rolling off the Danube. Mumbling incoherently to himself, he fumbled through the night. His meaty face was puffy and red from the strong liquor he had consumed and he stank of urine. He was an unpleasant sight and, in my dream, I knew he rather reveled in that fact.

Several common whores scampered away from him as he materialized out of the fog and he lewdly sneered at their fading forms.

He was nearly to his shabby home when he heard a strange noise whispering out of the misty darkness. It was a strange slurping noise, vaguely similar to his style of gulping down liquor. Staggering forward, he saw a dark shape emerge from the foggy night. It was a strange voluminous figure lying across the narrow alley. He stared at it for a long moment then he made out a slender hand emerging from the dark shape. It was a woman's hand, pale and very dirty in the faint light from the gas street lamp behind him.

Trapped within this lewd creature's mind, I knew he loved to hurt women and he was ecstatic at the thought of harassing some poor woman sleeping on the street.

"Hey, you there! You shouldn't be sleeping on the street, whore," he declared in a brash voice.

The shape shifted and a white face rose up from the blackness. It was a beautiful face, pale and fierce, with blazing eyes and a huge red mouth. No, no, dear journal, the mouth was not huge. Now I remember. It was smeared with blood.

The butcher, with me trapped within him, stared stupidly as that red mouth opened and two long sharp teeth stood out starkly as the woman hissed at him.

"What are you doing?" the butcher asked in confusion.

The woman rose up and stood over the whore sprawled out on the cold ground. "You should have turned around and run."

The woman's voice was soft, yet it sent chills down my spine and that of the butcher. Somewhere in the man's muddled mind, the order to run resounded fruitlessly. But he stood there, gawking, not moving. The last thing he ever

thought in his meager life was that a woman could never strike him down.

Then he was tossed through the air against the wall and his skull cracked open with a resounding crack.

Then I was free of his body and hovered over him as the woman drew closer.

It was then I saw my sister's face within the dark hood as she knelt down and sank her long teeth into the man's throat.

I awoke with a gasp, horrified beyond comprehension.

What madness is this? What madness has taken me to this darkest of nightmares! I am tormented and I do not know how I shall sleep!

What does it mean? Dear God, in heaven above, what does it mean?

Later-

I am quite mad. I know it. After my last entry I finally fell into a deep, yet restless sleep. Once more, I had a nightmare. This one torments me even more.

In my dream, I could see myself sprawled across the bed, one hand thrown casually over my head. My chest rose and fell with the rhythm of my breathing as I sank further into the depths of unconsciousness.

Across the room, the curtains danced a little jig on the night breeze. Softly, in the distance, a night bird called out into the serene darkness of the night.

I sighed languorously.

The curtains slowly calmed their dance until they were slowly billowing in and out to match my breathing. Slowly, silently, a mist began to pour over the window ledge, wispy tongues licking at the wall and floor. The mist rose up and swirled with sensual, exotic movements, twisting about as if to some unheard music of the night.

I whimpered slightly.

The curtains suddenly fell flat as the mist began to rise up, slowly blossoming into a pillar of swirling blue. With dramatic flair, the curtains suddenly unfurled as the mist parted and a woman moved into the room.

The long black dress trailed slightly behind her and a long cloak slipped from her pale shoulders and fell to the floor. Silently, stealthily she moved across the room until she stood over the bed. With fierce blue eyes, she stared down at my sleeping form.

In my dream, my nightmare, I hovered like a spirit in the corner of the room watching all that was occurring.

"Andrew," the woman whispered.

I saw myself stir slightly, then lapse back into the world of dreams.

The mist flowed around the bed, undulating with dark power.

"Andrew, open your eyes," the woman repeated, then I recognized the voice of my sister.

Slowly, almost reluctantly, I opened my eyes in the dream. Abruptly, I was in my own body staring up at my sister. The room was strangely transformed, the

atmosphere languid and heavy against me. I had to fight to keep my eyes open to see my sister standing at the end of the bed.

“Glynis?” I queried in confusion.

The creature before me was incredibly beautiful. The skin of the woman was so pale and translucent it almost seemed to glow with unearthly light. Her eyes were glittering like aquamarine jewels and there was a certain determination in them that made my hair rise on end. Her lips were red as blood and drawn into a somber line. As she stared down at me, I could see my sister’s features clearly, but yet, I was confused, for this creature oozed a sensuality my sister had never possessed.

“Andrew, it is I, your sister,” she said softly.

“Your face, Glynis, it is whole,” I answered. I tried to sit up, but I felt as though I was restrained by the wisps of mist flowing over me.

“Andrew, listen to me. This is a dream. A strange, exotic dream in a strange exotic land. But every word in this dream is truth and you must listen carefully,” Glynis said in a low voice.

I nodded slowly, unsure of what was happening, but I knew I must listen to the apparition of my sister.

“Andrew, your instincts were correct. Something is wrong here. Vlad is evil. He will destroy you and your family should he ever reach England. He already killed our parents and our beloved May. Do not fret over me, my darling brother. I am more powerful than you realize. It is important for you to move very slowly to assist Vlad. He cannot reach England. You must not help him move. Delay him, make excuses, but give me time to escape.”

“But Glynis you said you loved him,” I protested.

“Oh, Andrew, I loathe him. He holds me in his power and I cannot escape. At least, not yet. I need you to do as I say. This dream will haunt you, but you will not speak of it to another. You will do as I say but you will not give voice to your reason. I need time, Andrew. Time to escape. And when I do, I will come to you in England. Do you understand?”

This woman who was my sister, yet something more than human, terrified me. “I want my sister to come home.”

“I will. When I can. But not with Vlad. If I go with him to England it will mean death for you, Angeline and your child.”

I felt a pressure against my head, and I fell back on the pillows breathing heavily.

“Do you understand? Please, Andrew, tell me you understand.”

“Yes, yes, I understand,” I whispered through slackened lips.

She moved through the thick mist and leaned over me. Her beautiful face was so ethereal and deadly, but there was a kindness in those sparkling eyes.

“What are you?” I gasped.

“A dream with truths woven within. Remember,” Glynis whispered, then

pressed her lips to my forehead.

I fell back onto the bed, then once more I was outside of my body, hovering in the corner.

I watched as my sister, beautiful and not human in anyway, stood over me weeping tears tinged with blood.

Then with a sudden whoosh, the mist rolled out of the window and the curtains fell flat against the wall and she was gone. Then slowly, they once more began to dance on the night breeze...

I awoke, truly awoke, but still I was confused and frightened. I crawled from the bed and staggered through the room to the desk where I now sit writing.

A dream interwoven with truths...

I believe that, even if I cannot accept the ungodly creature in my dreams as truly being my sister. I believe what she said in my slumbering mind. It makes no sense, I know this, but I believe the dream.

Even though it makes my heart weary, I shall do my best to delay Vlad Dracula from moving to England and give my sister the opportunity to escape him.

Oh, God, dearest journal, this may sound insane, but my sister in my dream, I think she was a vampire and now my sleep-addled brain wonders, truly wonders, why was she veiled. Did her veils hide a terrible secret more horrible than scars? And what happened to me that first day in my sister's home when I was gripped with that strange paralysis?

I must sleep, truly sleep, and get far away from this land and recover my sanity.

Then I will consider everything that I have endured here.

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

21st of April, 1820

Buda, Hungary

I have done what I must to ensure that my brother is safe. I went to him as he slept and whispered into his dreams. I left him sleeping peacefully, but also with a heavy heart. I believe he will obey and delay Vlad, but I fear that I have revealed myself to him. He is as perceptive as I, and even as I pressed myself into his dreams, I could feel his own power pushing back, seeking to reveal me fully to him. I fear he has seen my true face.

I am unsure of what fruit my actions will bear, but I now feel that Andrew is at least safe from Vlad's manipulations. My words should haunt him and prompt him to obey my instructions. I know that I have only confirmed his doubts concerning my new life and that terrifies me. I know he can be as headstrong as I, but I have to believe he will protect Angeline and Johnny and allow me to save myself.

As I waded through the fine mist trailing over the lush lawn, a night bird called out questioningly. It was a sad, forlorn sound, and it echoed in the hollowness within me. I drew near the front gate and my hands lifted to draw the cloak more tightly about my shoulders. The night was so still that the only movement was the gentle swaying of the trees standing guard near the gate.

Shadows slinked along the wall encircling the estate and as I drew near, I realized that one particular shadow seemed to remain stationary. I stopped in mid-step, my eyes focusing intently on this one shadow. My skin began to prickle as I realized I was being watched by another dark power. A stab of terror pierced through me as the horrible thought that Vlad might have followed me came sharply to mind.

The shadow took on the form of a man as I watched in fearful anticipation. The fear that Vlad had found me overwhelmed me, and I began to draw up my power around me, preparing to flee. I knew that the dark power had seen me, but if it was Vlad I could think of nothing else but to run.

Moonlight fell through the tree branches flicking over the shape as it moved swiftly toward me. As the light from the moon washed over the figure, it cleansed away the shadows revealing the pale visage of a vampire. Slowly, the long pale face of Ignatius emerged from the gloom and he stood before me, clad completely in black.

Relieved, I flung out my hand toward him. "You frightened me!"

"My apologies," he answered immediately. Tonight he wore a tidy beard and mustache, his long black hair curling slightly upon his shoulders.

I stomped my foot, my hands clenched. "I thought you were Vlad. I had the most awful start!"

"But I am not Vlad," he answered, smiling.

I snorted and proceeded to walk down the street.

He immediately fell into step beside me, his hands tucked behind his back. "Where are we going?"

"I was returning home," I answered him rather tartly. I was annoyed at how frightened I had been, so I was a bit snappish.

"You think Vlad would mind if I visited?"

"Do not tease me!" I whirled about, facing him. "This is not humorous at all! There are lives at stake and I...I..." I flung up my hands, stomping my foot. "You do not understand."

Ignatius tilted his head and arched an eyebrow. "Explain?"

"My brother is in danger. I warned him tonight, in a dream, to not help Vlad. This means all could come crashing down upon me rather swiftly, and I know not if I am prepared for it. I have seen Vlad do terrible things. I feel him inside of me and I fear he will detect my intentions. I do not know if I can win against him. I believe I can, but how can I be certain?"

He blinked at the end of the gush of my words, then said, "You would have to

attack him when he is weak, drain him of all his blood, decapitate him, burn his body, and then you would be free. Well, you could also drain all of his blood and entomb him, but Masters tend to come back from that more often than not.”

It was my turn to stare at him, startled at his words, and a bit overwhelmed.

“Oh. I see.”

“But I would not advise that until you are a bit stronger in your abilities. Considering you are not even one year into your dark life, you are quite formidable. Perhaps because he is a powerful vampire. But you may not be able to destroy him that easily.”

“Could you?”

Ignatius sighed. “Perhaps. But I am bound by that which I cannot speak of.”

I curled my lip at him and stomped my foot again. “Oh, very well!” I waved my hand at him, starting off down the lane.

Again, he fell into step beside me.

“You know, I would like nothing more than for you to be free of him so we could be together,” Ignatius said after a long bit of silence.

“My life is very complicated as you well reminded me at the ball,” I said fiercely.

We were now quite close to my home, walking in the shadow of the great wall that surrounded it. The ivy was thick and lush, its dark leaves black in the night. I wished to see the foliage as it is in the sun in that moment, but I knew that was quite impossible.

“Yes, but I am still here, am I not? I have sought you out because you are important to me. And I am quite frustrated, as you are, that we cannot be freely together.” His voice was now quite somber.

I took note of the priest garb at once. “You say I am complicated, yet you wear priest garb.”

He shrugged. “On occasion.”

“Why?”

“Because sometimes it is necessary.”

“Why?”

“Must you ask so many questions?”

I threw up my hands, turning to walk away. He caught my wrist and hurled me into the ivy. I turned about just before I hit the wall, my back slapping against the stones. Then he was on me, kissing me fiercely, his hands buried in my hair. I responded to his kiss eagerly, my anger quickly draining way into passion. And why should I lie here? I admit I was a beast to him to see if he would still want me. I am quite happy that he did.

I am a bit embarrassed to admit it, dearest diary, but I let him ravish me right then and there. Openly, in the lane, buried in the ivy, I let him take me. Clothes were pushed desperately aside and then we were joined. I absolutely delighted in the frenzy of his passion for me.

Alas, I am truly a wicked, scandalous woman and though my cheeks should be quite red, I am afraid they are not.

“Do not doubt,” he whispered in my ear. “Do not doubt for a moment, that I want nothing more than to call you mine and love you for eternity.”

I turned my face so I could gaze into his eyes and managed to say with trembling lips, “I only want the same.”

Our kisses were full of adoration for one another as we straightened out our clothing. Wrapped in each other’s arms, we kissed softly and gently, our passion melting away into something much more peaceful.

“You need to return home,” he said finally.

“I know,” I answered.

His hand stroked my hair, then he cradled my face as he kissed me very lovingly. “The fountain at the hotel at the base of the hill. I will be there every night at ten o’clock. Come to me when you can.”

“I will. I promise,” I answered him.

He drew me out of the ivy, and I stood quietly as he arranged my cloak around me. I could not help but smile at him and his very stoic face suddenly smiled back at me.

“Are you truly a priest?” I finally asked.

There was pain in his eyes, and he turned his face away to hide it. “Our past is our past. Let us not speak of it.”

“Were you?” I persisted.

Ignatius turned toward me. I saw the depth of his despair and it made me cold inside. “The past is best left to the past.” Taking my hand, he drew me with him down the street to the gate that lead up the drive to my house.

“You know where we live?”

He pointed to the “V” with the red dragon curled around it on the gate. “Dracul. Vlad Dracula.”

I looked down at my ring and his gaze followed.

“He puts his seal upon all he possesses.”

“My heart is yours,” I said firmly.

With a smile, Ignatius kissed my knuckles and then released my hand. “And that, dear Glynis, is my salvation in the darkness.”

And then he was gone.

I pouted a bit, but then I heard the sound of a carriage. I leaped over the gate and fled down the drive to the house. I was a blur of motion. By the time Vlad entered my room, I was in my bath. Magda is required to have a hot bath for me when I return from feeding. I always feel sullied by my victims and feel much better after bathing.

“How was the hunt?” Vlad sat on my bed, regarding me.

“A butcher. Quite disgusting. Oh, yes, and a whore.”

He sniffed the air. “Ah, yes.”

I sunk deeper into the bath and tried to look innocent.

“Glynis?”

“Yes?”

“I think we shall stay on here in Buda until we leave for England.”

“I thought perhaps we would be returning soon to the castle.”

“There is nothing in the castle for us. We shall stay here. Do you find this acceptable?”

“But the sisters,” I whispered.

Vlad merely shrugged.

“Vlad, the sisters,” I persisted.

“They are of no consequence,” he finally said.

I felt tears in my eyes, hot and heavy.

Vlad rose to his feet and moved to the side of the bath. With the flick of his hand, he dismissed Magda and she rushed out. Looming over me, he gazed down.

“We shall stay in Buda and continue our lives as the Count and Countess Dracula until all the arrangements have been made and we move to England.”

“Cneajna, Elina, Ariana, what of them, Vlad?”

“As I said, their time has passed. Leave them to their castle home.”

“Will you dismiss me as easily as you dismiss them when I am no longer of worth to you?”

Vlad laughed at this. “Do not be foolish. You are nothing like your sisters.”

“But Cneajna is the first!”

Reaching down, his hand trailed down the side of my face, down my throat to my breast. Leaning over, he kissed my lips. “No, you are the first. I shall find you new sisters in England.”

Twisting around in the bath, I rose onto my knees. “You cannot do this.”

“Why not?” He knelt beside the bath, looking at me fiercely. “Why not?”

“You love them!”

“Their time has passed,” he answered me. He grabbed hold of my wrist and lifted me out of the water. I dangled from his grasp until he drew me tight against him. “Your time has now come.”

I gasped as he drew his sharp nail across his throat, opening a wound.

“Drink,” he said.

I knew then there was a hidden meaning to this, but I could not fathom it. I still cannot fathom it. But I did drink. His blood was the richest of all blood, perhaps because I was created from it. As I drank, he bit into my neck and also drank.

The ecstasy swept me away as I shuddered with the power of this blood filling me.

Later, when he laid me down in our hidden room, my body limp and my mind drunk with his power, he pressed soft kisses over my naked flesh. He literally

adorned my body with his lips and his hair fell over me like thick rich ropes of velvet.

Drunk with his power, I could feel his desires and thoughts. I heard the sound of battles and felt the heat of war. I heard his voice commanding armies and the screams of his victims. All the while, he laid his kisses upon my fevered body.

My eyes fluttered as he settled between my thighs and his mouth began to consume me, making me writhe beneath him. The shadows danced over the walls and I saw them evolve, twisting into the shapes of thousands of impaled people. Then the shadows fell away to reveal ghostly images of people. I saw a handsome man with features similar to Vlad, yet more striking, riding into battle in the robes of a Turkish prince. I felt Vlad's hate for him, his need to destroy him. I saw Cneajna in the sunlight, flowers in her hair, holding Vlad close as he spoke of his conquests.

All the while, he made me gasp and claw at his hair and shoulders.

I saw Erzsébet, inhuman and beautiful, coming to him, holding him to her breast as he drank her blood.

I saw it all. I felt it all, yet all the while he feasted on me.

At last I screamed his name and he rose up to press deep into me and hold me tight as I held onto his broad shoulders. I was crying desperately and the room spun around me.

He did not kiss me, but stared down into my face, watching my eyes, watching my tears, then he lowered me down, as I clawed at my hair and wept.

"Now you know what I am, who I am," he said.

I cried as I pressed my hands up against him.

"Tell me who I am," he whispered and once more thrust into me.

"Dracul! Dracul! Vlad Tepes! The Impaler! The Dracul!"

Finally, I understood exactly what those words meant. He had been the Impaler, the Dragon, the Prince of Wallachia who had fought against the Turk invaders and his own brother. He was a man of vision and of passion. He was a force to be feared. He was my Master and in my blood.

He lowered himself over me, burying his face in my neck and hair, his hand lying upon my breast.

"And who are you?"

In my drunken madness, as the reality of his mortal life mingled with mine, I sobbed and laid my hand on his hair.

"Yours," I whispered in agony. "Your wife."

And he kissed me and I knew then we were both damned.

Chapter 30

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

24th of April, 1820

Buda, Hungary

I have not even begun to fully understand what I experienced with Vlad. I still have Vlad's memories haunting me, and his presence seems to always be near me even when he is absent. Slowly, the strength of his power is fading, but it has left me feeling frightened and disillusioned.

Yet, he has released me to live my new life. I have settled into running the household, even if it is by night, and he is allowing me to redecorate the parlor. I almost feel like a true aristocrat. And, sadly, I now truly feel like his wife.

I now loathe him more than I did before. I feel a bond to him that I despise. Meanwhile, he seems content in the new order of things. But I am not content. I do not wish to be his wife. I do not wish to know him as anything more than the monster that murdered my family. I do not want to know him as a man or understand his motivations as a mortal.

I have no desire to be sympathetic toward him.

Tonight, he entered the sitting room where I was busy arranging a bouquet of flowers. He drew near and stared down at me.

"What is it?" I asked him sharply.

He merely looked bemused. "I am going out of town for a few days to tend to matters."

"The sisters?"

"No. Business matters," he answered.

"How long will you be gone?"

"A few days. No more than four," he answered me.

I frowned at him. "Are you leaving with the Baroness?"

"Jealous?"

I merely shrugged.

"I will return in a few nights," he said simply. He leaned over and kissed my lips softly.

I followed him out of curiosity and saw the servants taking his bags to the carriage. Sir Stephen stood nervously near the horses dressed in traveling clothes.

"Good evening, Sir Stephen," I said as I drew near, my eyes narrowing.

"Countess Dracula," he said nervously. "How are you this evening?"

"Well, thank you," I answered. I could feel my teeth sliding down to flash between my lips.

He gulped and forced a smile. "That is good to hear."

"Glynis, stop terrifying Stephen," Vlad said, slipping past me.

"Oh, she was not bother-" Stephen started to protest, then gave up.

Vlad turned and drew me to him. "You are my first bride. Do not forget that. We shall create a life for ourselves beyond this one."

I nodded, glancing back at Sir Stephen. "I know this."

Vlad directed my attention back to him with the tips of his fingers tucked under my chin. He kissed me firmly, then released me.

I do not delude myself into believing he loves me. I think he is merely infatuated by the concept of being a mortal aristocrat and living a mortal life with a bride at his side. But, in that moment, I was afraid he did love me.

Like a dutiful wife, I stood on the steps and watched him depart.

Once the carriage was out of view, I turned and fled up to my room. I found myself in tears as I ripped off my dress and threw myself on the bed.

Magda appeared before me, looking concerned, "Madam, shall I draw a bath?"

Looking up at her, I wiped my tears away. "No, no. I am going to go out tonight. I need to feed."

My thoughts, of course, had turned to Ignatius. I needed to see him. To feel untainted by Vlad's power. I could not bear to think of my trapped sisters starving into madness in the Carpathian Mountains or how Vlad had drawn me even closer to him through his blood. I wanted to be free of it all and merely be myself: Lady Glynis Wright.

Dressing in one of my finest gowns of pale blue silk, I began to regain my senses and not feel the tears threatening. I sat at my vanity while Magda fixed my hair and adorned it with jeweled combs.

"You look lovely," Magda said finally.

There were no mirrors in our home, so I could only believe her. I did feel lovely in my gown as I looked up at her. "Thank you, Magda."

Rising to my feet, I glanced at my tiny watch and tucked it into my purse. Moving toward the door, she hurried behind me with my cloak.

"I will return near morning," I told her.

"I will have your bath ready," she assured me.

I only had a few minutes to reach the fountain in the gardens of the hotel if I wished to see Ignatius.

"Shall I have them bring about the caleche?" she asked as she hurried down the stairs after me.

"Oh, no. I am much quicker without it."

She nodded, but her brow furrowed worriedly.

Flashing her my brightest smile, I threw open the door and hurried into the night. It was a lovely, clear evening with the stars glittering coldly in the sky. The breeze off the Danube was refreshing and cool against my skin.

It was odd and somewhat overwhelming to realize that I felt more liberated this night than I had in a long time. As I rushed down the lane, I began to feel unshackled from the suffocating bond I now had with Vlad. Away from our home, I felt a renewed sense of self as his presence began to fade from my mind. My fear and loathing of him had so tainted my thoughts that I had not realized the full depth of my despair until it began to dissipate.

Hurrying past the estates of Buda's wealthiest, I cast a disparaging eye upon the home of Sir Stephen. I missed the presence of my brother, but I must admit I am relieved that he is returning home to England. To know he is safely away is a great comfort to me.

Reaching the bottom of the hill, I slowed to a more human pace and patted down my hair and dress. Glancing about to make certain no one was about, I leapt easily over the wall and into the garden beyond. Landing elegantly, I adjusted my skirts and strolled down the path.

Ignatius was seated near the fountain reading a small book. His hair was much longer tonight and held back by a silver clasp. Dressed in an elegant scarlet velvet coat and black long trousers, he was quite striking.

As I drew near, he glanced up at me and slightly smiled. Tucking away the book in his coat pocket, he rose, taking my hands in his.

"I cannot express how infinitely joyful I am to see you," he said.

I giggled at his words while smacking him with my fan. "You are too much."

He chuckled and kissed my hand lightly. His dark blue eyes gazed at me with delight as he tucked my hand into the crook of his arm and lead me down the path.

"I admit I was hoping you would join me tonight. Word is your Master is out of town and I dared to hope to see you," he said.

"I can assure you that every chance I have to see you I shall grip firmly with both hands and hold onto tightly. It has been a difficult month. I daresay that I have not been in the best frame of mind."

He nodded, his long face somber. "I know. I feel it. What he did to you."

I turned my face away, embarrassed and distraught. I was uncertain what he meant. I was distressed to think he would know that I had lain with Vlad after being with him.

"He renewed his bond with you. I can feel it. It is stronger than before." He looked quite sad as he said these words.

"I will not always be with him," I said firmly. "I can promise you that much. I cannot allow myself to continue as I am now. I despise him and I loathe that I am bound to him."

Ignatius turned to me, his hand raising mine to his lips. Kissing my fingers, he whispered against my skin. "If you despise him and love me, than I can endure our complicated existence a bit better. I have never loved any woman as I love you. You have complicated my life beyond my expectations, but I am willing to wait for that night you are mine and mine alone."

"You have my heart. That is why I am here. When I am free, I will come to you," I declared. "Do you not think I am quite overwhelmed by how I feel for you? I hardly know you, but I love you so fiercely it hurts. I am yours, sir. Perhaps not by blood, but my heart, my mind, and what is left of my soul is yours." My words were vehement and the truth.

He smiled when I finished, and his kiss enraptured me.

When we parted, he said, "Then we shall enjoy this time together and not think of unpleasant things. For tonight, we belong only to each other and no other."

"Agreed," I answered him. "Now, what shall we do to celebrate our time?"

"I can think of many things, but tonight, I desire to take you someplace I know Vlad would never dare take you."

"Really? And where would that be?" I was instantly intrigued.

Ignatius gave me a secretive smile. "Ah, but it is a surprise."

I pouted at him. He laughed.

"Truly, it is best if it is a surprise."

Walking together, we passed among the humans still out and about at this late hour. Carriages rattled by while music filtered out into the night through closed doors. The elite of Buda filled the fancy restaurants and concert halls as we slipped easily through the throng.

We turned down a long narrow side street as Ignatius pressed my hand gently with his. I adored the way his eyes admired me as he drew me closer.

"I am pleased that you are here with me," Ignatius said softly, then we turned into a dark alcove set into a wall.

In the darkest corner was a narrow door that looked quite worn and battered. He knocked upon it and it opened on silent hinges. With a glimmer in his eyes, he stepped into the darkness beyond.

I was a little taken aback by the dank void that lingered beyond the tiny, narrow battered door, but I trusted him, so I followed.

I was plunged into icy darkness, then abruptly I was in a brightly lit hallway that glittered with gold. I raised my hand to shield my eyes that were still adjusting to the sudden brilliance.

Turning about in surprise, I saw a footman closing an enormous gilded door that lead onto the street. It did not resemble in any way the tiny door we had passed through. I knew then that I was in a place of magic and wonder.

Turning back around, I looked up at the chandelier sparkling with gold and crystal. The walls were decorated in rich scarlet paper with intricate gold designs flowing over it. The carpet beneath my feet was thick and exotic in design.

Ignatius stood in the candlelight thrown by the chandelier, smiling at me. He reached out his hand and I took it, laughing excitedly. Paintings adorned the walls portraying exotic lands and beautiful people. I spun about on my heel trying to take in the sheer beauty of the hallway, but Ignatius pulled me on.

A butler greeted us with several maids behind him. The women took our cloaks and disappeared through another door hidden by scarlet curtains.

"Where are we?"

Ignatius kissed my forehead. "Purgatory. Or so the proprietor likes to call it."

It was then that an amazing creature appeared from behind another set of thick velvet curtains. It moved toward us as if it was gliding, not walking. It was tall, elegant, pale of face and had long, flowing blond hair. I knew instantly it was not human, but it was also not a vampire. It wore a long white gown that was draped artistically on its pale form as if it were some sort of Greek statue.

And its eyes, its eyes, were like were like flames of fire.

“Ignatius,” it said in a voice that was neither female nor male.

“Good evening, Astir,” Ignatius responded with a slight bow of his head.

“A private dining room, I take it,” the creature said, turning its eerily fiery eyes toward me.

“Of course.”

“And who is your companion?”

Ignatius turned to me and said, “A friend.”

“And we are discreet,” Astir said with a small smile. It lifted one hand and a butler appeared from behind another red curtain and bowed.

“Please, follow me,” the newcomer said.

Astir smiled at me softly, then turned, and I saw two terrible scars on its back, then it was gone with a sweep of its long robe.

Ignatius took my hand and drew me after him as we stepped beyond the curtain. We traveled down a long hallway, just as opulent as the first, but a bit narrower. Thick curtains covered doorways and the butler guided us to one near the end of the hall. Pressing back the curtain, we stepped into a very elegant, yet small dining room with an exotic round table and two chairs. The walls were dark and the curtains that flowed to the floor beside the ornate fireplace were so dark blue they were almost black.

“Your private stock,” the butler asked.

“Yes, please,” Ignatius answered.

The butler drew out my chair. I sat down and looked to Ignatius curiously. He looked quite serious and a tad mysterious. He took the chair opposite of me and raised his hand to rest his chin upon his knuckles.

“Where are we?” I asked.

A waiter entered the room with a tray with two crystal goblets upon it and a bottle with an ornate seal upon it.

“Purgatory, like I said,” Ignatius answered again. “Or at least Astir calls it that. Astir’s guests call it the Haven, for this is a haven for all things not human.”

The waiter popped the cork and poured the wine into the goblets. I looked up at him to see if there was anything irregular about him, but he appeared as bland and ordinary as any waiter in a fine restaurant.

The curtain parted and a lovely young woman stepped into the room dressed in an ornate robe the color of a peacock’s throat. She curtsied to us, her blond locks falling around her sweet face.

“Good evening, sir,” she said to Ignatius.

I admit a bristled a bit at the look in her eye.

“Good evening,” he answered.

She proffered her arm and the waiter drew a fine silver dagger and slashed her wrist. I was amazed to see that she barely winced. Tilting her hand she allowed the blood to trickle down her fingers and into our wine goblets.

I flicked my gaze to Ignatius, arching an eyebrow. He smiled slightly at me over his hand.

The waiter slipped a white cloth about the girl’s wrist and tied it firmly. After another curtsey, she slipped out of the room. I noticed not one drop of blood had fallen onto the fine tablecloth or the floor.

The waiter presented both of us with a wine glass, then he also slipped from the room.

“That girl,” I began.

“She will be fine. They have potions here that will allow her to heal quickly.”

“And she is human and knows what we are?”

Ignatius nodded. “Some humans are willing to serve us in exchange for... pleasures.”

I frowned at him.

“No, no, not I. But others perhaps,” he assured me.

“Well, she certainly adored you,” I said with a little sneer.

“But I adore you.” He raised his glass to me. “Come now. Do not pout. Let us toast our night together.”

Feeling a bit peeved, but wishing to please him, I raised my glass.

“To our love,” Ignatius said simply, tapping my glass with the lip of his.

“To a lovely night,” I answered, smiling.

The wine mingled with blood was exquisite to my pallet and I drank it down a bit too quickly. I instantly felt giddy and giggled.

“Only the finest is served here,” Ignatius said. He was sipping his wine, watching me, drinking in my appearance in a way that made me all the more girlish.

“Astir is not one of us, is...uh...he...she?”

Ignatius nodded. “No. Not at all. Astir is one of the Fallen.”

I gasped and raised my hand to my throat. “No! Truly?”

“That is why Astir calls this Purgatory. Neither heaven nor hell.”

“Then Astir is a demon?”

“No, darling. One of the Fallen. Demons are quite a different sort.”

I gaped at Ignatius, then narrowed my eyes. “Is he...she...in league with Satan?”

Ignatius looked quite solemn at my query, but smiled a little ironic smile.

“No, darling. Astir fell to earth and sides with no one. But Astir’s story is not mine to tell.”

I pouted at this, tapping my foot irritably. I was terribly intrigued by our host

and all that surrounded me. Violins were playing somewhere nearby, and I could hear laughter.

“There are many rooms with many delights, but I felt you should be introduced slowly,” Ignatius said as he noticed my curiosity.

The curtains to our private little area were thrown back. A woman stood in the doorway, arms flung out, grinning almost madly. She was quite striking with a very handsome face and fine gold blond hair drawn up into an ornate style on her head. Her eyes though, were as dark as the deepest waters of the ocean and appeared almost black. With a wild laugh, she descended on us, her silver dress, with its fine beading and lace, rustling as she moved.

“Father Ignatius, it is true! You do have a woman with you! What scandal is this?”

Ignatius sighed, slowly turning his gaze to her. “Dominique, how lovely to see you here.”

“You are such a liar,” she responded, smacking him with her ostrich fan.

Ignatius looked at me with a rather pained expression.

I stood up, extended my hand, and said, “I am Lady Glynis Wright.”

With a grin, she took my hand, and, to my surprise, kissed it. “I am Dominique. A dear, dear friend of Father Ignatius.”

I saw him cover his face out of the corner of my eye as he sighed.

“It is a pleasure,” I said, trying to seem not one bit unnerved by her, even though I was.

“Oscar!” she shouted into the hallway.

A young man, quite mortal and very drunk, appeared.

“Really, Oscar! What are you doing?”

“Attempting to walk,” he answered, and promptly fell to the ground.

“He cannot hold his liquor at all,” she sighed, fanning herself. “I really do not know why I keep him around.”

“I satisfy your every need,” he answered from the floor.

“For now,” she sniffed, then smiled at me rakishly. Her teeth were very sharp, and I realized she was a vampire.

“How are you tonight, Dominique?” Ignatius asked, still not moving from his chair.

“Completely devastated by you not introducing me to your dear companion,” she said as she flung herself to her knees and clung to him.

“Perhaps because I feared this sort of scene,” he said to her.

“I am a bit drunk,” she admitted with a smile.

“Very much drunk,” he corrected her.

“And quite hurt that you did not tell me you had taken on a lover,” she said with a pout.

I felt awkward standing, so I sat down in my chair and played with the stem of my goblet.

“It was not my understanding that I had to report to you,” Ignatius answered. “But I am your dearest friend!”

This made him laugh and he shook his head with amusement.

Rising to her feet, she swung about his chair, her hands resting on the back of it as he leaned over to gaze at me. “It is good to see that he finally allowed himself to love someone other than God.”

Quite suddenly the frivolity was gone from the mood in the room. Ignatius abruptly and terrifyingly looked quite sullen. Dominique seemed to realize she had gone too far and quickly spun away on her heel, fanning herself.

“Sometimes your tongue runs before your sense,” Ignatius said sharply.

“Yes, it does,” she conceded, but then turned to smile at me. “You must come and see me in Venice. We shall be grand friends one day. You shall see.”

“I should like that,” I answered politely, not quite certain what else to say.

With the flash of her sharp fangs, she was gone, dragging her mortal lover behind her by his collar.

As the curtain fell back over the doorway, we sat in the silence filling the small room with its ornate furnishings and flickering candlelight. Ignatius was still and shrouded in shadows, his long hair falling over his shoulders.

“You are a priest,” I said slowly.

“Was,” he answered.

I lowered my eyes, not quite sure what to say or think. I had thought the priest garb a disguise. Now I realized my beloved Ignatius was a man I hardly knew despite my love for him.

“I was a priest,” he said admitted.

“Then all this,” I said to him, motioning with my hand. “All this is truly your purgatory?”

He raised his eyes, and I saw the great sadness there. “I am in hell and I swore I would never be happy in it. Never. And then, I found you.”

I smiled slightly, nervously.

“And I love you,” he said softly. “I love you as I never dared believe I would love any woman. You have made this hell bearable.”

“But it is not as easy as that, is it?”

“No,” he answered with a sigh. “You are my great sin. I swore to love none but God. But I have broken that vow.”

I felt tears on my face. When he saw them, he was instantly at my side, drawing me up into his arms.

“Let us not speak of the past,” he said swiftly. “Let us not speak of what was, but relish what is.”

I stroked his face with my fingers as I kissed his lips tenderly. “I love you, but I do not want to hurt you.”

“And that, my darling, is the crux of it. You do not hurt me. You heal me,” he said, and kissed my face all over.

We clung together until my tears faded and our kisses grew passionate. I could feel his pain, but I could also feel his love for me. Soon all that was left was his love, pulsating in his kisses and in his touch.

“Come,” he said at last. “Come see what there is to see.”

He drew me from our small haven and out into the hall. Immediately, a footman appeared to walk before us. Upon silent orders, he flung open two large doors I had not seen before.

We entered a grand salon filled with people, music and dance. Some were mortal, others vampires, and others appeared mortal, but I felt they were not. I watched as humans gave themselves up willingly to little groups of vampires, receiving bites and kisses, their expressions languid and pleased. I marveled at this sight, pondering my many hunting expeditions. How easily these humans gave themselves up here!

Men were gathered together talking and laughing. Some of the women were in tight little cliques gossiping animatedly. Violinists were playing wild, crazed Hungarian music and a few people were dancing. Tucked into tiny alcoves, a few people indulged in more scandalous pursuits.

Dominique was sitting at a table, smoking a pipe, and talking loudly with a man I knew instantly was a vampire. He was beautiful and radiant with long red hair. Beside her, Oscar was slumped against her chair, snoring loudly.

“Vlad comes here?” I asked softly of Ignatius.

“Yes, at times,” Ignatius answered.

“So you do know him and he knows you?” I said.

“Yes,” he said in a tone that was truthful, but also demanded no more questions.

Unexpectedly, he turned, gripped me tightly about the waist, and swung me around into a wild dance. I clung to him as we joined the other dancers' gay movements.

We danced and laughed for quite some time. I loved seeing him smile and his gaiety seemed to surprise more than a few onlookers. At one point, I saw Astir and Dominique in deep conversation and knew they were speaking of Ignatius.

We drank more wine mingled with blood, and I even took a sip from a young man who offered me his wrist. I boldly sat on Ignatius' lap and he happily wrapped his arms about my waist.

“Countess Dracula,” Astir said as the Fallen was suddenly beside us.

I gave him (for I shall now call Astir male for lack of a better address) a very dark look and he laughed.

“Oh, come now, I know who you are. Your husband speaks highly of you.”

I stood up sharply, blushing. Panic gripped me as I realized I could be exposed and Vlad's wrath would descend on me.

Astir took hold of my arm. “This is a place of discretion. None will speak of your appearance here with our dear Father Ignatius.”

Ignatius slowly rose to his feet and slid his hand around my waist. “Astir speaks the truth.”

“If you tell Vlad...”

“I will not, I can assure you. Neither will anyone else who knows who you truly are. But Countess, what I wished to tell you is that you are always most welcome here and should you need me I am at your disposal.”

“Why?” My tone was clipped and fierce.

He laughed at my boldness, but his gaze strayed to Ignatius. “Because, darling, I am intrigued by any woman who could snare the heart of one who swore it to God.”

“You taunt me,” Ignatius snapped.

“Yes,” Astir answered, gliding away.

I stomped my foot, frowning, but Ignatius drew me close.

“Astir likes to provoke. Do not give into the Fallen’s games.”

I looked up into the face of my beloved. “I feel like a child here. Confused and uncertain, yet, giddy at the prospect of being included.”

Ignatius kissed my lips. “I know, my love. But I am here to guide you.”

What followed was a blur. I am not trying to hide anything, for God knows I have written of things in this journal I never thought I would divulge. I remember dancing, drinking more wine, and ,at one point, exchanging long glances with Dominique.

“Come see me in Venice,” she said one last time as I passed her table, and then I never saw her again.

Everything became wild and chaotic as I drank more wine and began to speak with others in the room. I do not truly remember what was said or who they were, but they were all quite intrigued by Ignatius and I. None seem to recognize me as the bride of Vlad Dracula, much to my relief. Ignatius merely shook his head if the inquiries were too personal.

Finally, we ended up alone, kissing madly in a hallway. I felt Ignatius' hands in my hair, tugging free the combs that Magda had so carefully tucked into my coif. As our kisses became more savage, I realized we were no longer in a hallway, but a beautiful, exotic bedroom. I recognized it as Turkish in design from Vlad’s memories. It felt quite decadent.

Ignatius drew me down with him onto the enormous bed laden with silks and velvets, kissing me ardently. The sweet smell of incense filled the room, and I felt intoxicated by the magic of this place. I drew back from him, my hand sliding over his chest as I sat up.

“What is this place?”

Ignatius rose up beside me, kissing my throat as his hands freed me of my dress. “A place to be safe.”

My hands nestled in his hair as he kissed my mouth. I smiled against the softness of his beard, kissing his cheek. “Are you certain?”

“Astir chooses what we do or do not remember of this place. If he tells you Vlad will not know you were here with me, then you will not be remembered except by those he trusts.”

“You and Dominique.” I traced my fingers along the length of his nose, and he kissed my fingers when they reached his lips.

“Yes. Me and Dominique.” His long raven black hair was silky soft against my breasts as I held him while his long fingers slid down my bare back. “Stay with me here tonight.”

Holding his body in my arms, I felt so close to him in every way: spirit and body. When I was with him I always felt so free, so loved, so incredibly alive. I did want to stay with him. I wanted to sleep in his arms.

“I will have to send notice to my household,” I said at last.

Perhaps it was the magic of Haven, the sweet smell of the incense, or the feel of Ignatius in my arms, but I wanted to take the risk and stay with him.

Movement caught my eye. I looked up to see a footman standing beside the bed with a silver tray. Upon it was a piece of paper, ink well and quill.

Ignatius grinned at my expression and moved to hide my naked torso from the footman with a silken throw. I reached out with quivering fingers to take the items on the tray, my eyes regarding the footman with suspicion. He seemed quite unremarkable and looked at me with a rather bored expression.

“This place always anticipates your needs,” Ignatius said to me, kissing my shoulder.

I quickly scribbled a note to Magda, then placed it on the silver tray. The footman bowed, then stepped behind the long, flowing draperies hanging from the ceiling and disappeared. I pushed back the purple silk and saw that the room was empty except for Ignatius and I.

“This place cannot possibly be real,” I gasped.

“Perhaps its not, but we are here together and that is real enough for me,” Ignatius answered.

I cradled his face in my hands and kissed him. I felt his arms slid around me as he pulled me to him. As we kissed, I sank back into the silken pillows on the bed as his body settled over mine.

“I am yours,” I whispered.

“And I am yours,” he answered.

My fingers lightly played with his beard and his silken hair caressed my cheek. “There is no place I would rather be than with you, Ignatius.”

His response was a kiss. That kiss deepened until our passion flared, and I was lost to all but our lovemaking.

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright-Continued

Buda , Hungary

I find myself struggling to write about all that happened after I awakened with Ignatius in the lair of Astir the Fallen. To awaken in the arms of the man I loved was truly magnificent, but what followed soon after still has me shaken.

After I awoke, Ignatius remained sleeping as I sat beside him admiring his long raven hair as it flowed over his pale skin. He seemed quite peaceful as he slept and it gave me some measure of comfort. Too many times the night before, I seen his face shadowed with pain when his past was remarked upon. That he was once a priest has given me pause a few times. It does bother me to think that he was a man of God and that he is now as trapped in darkness as I am. My struggle with my own vampiric nature is difficult enough, but how terrible is it for him?

Perhaps it was reckless of me to spend the day making love with Ignatius in Astir's haven, but the temptation was too great. Though I wish not to admit it, I fear that Vlad will somehow disrupt my affair with Ignatius and that I will find myself cut off from the man I love so very much. These were my thoughts until they were interrupted unexpectedly by a voice.

“He looks quite tranquil when he sleeps.”

I turned to see Astir standing near the bed. Once more the creature was dressed in a white robe that draped over its tall slim form and trailed behind the Fallen. Tonight, Astir appeared more female than male with its hair drawn up high on its head and falling in long thick golden curls to its waist.

“And he should not?”

“It is rare among your kind,” Astir answered. “Often your faces seem tormented as you rest.”

I lay a hand gently on Ignatius' flat belly. “I suppose. But it is not very easy to be what we are.”

Astir shrugged. “It is complicated only if you make it so.”

“Do you drink the blood of mortals to survive?” I asked pointedly.

Astir grimaced. “Oh, dear God, no.” Waving a long fingered hand, it moved further into view.

Once more I took note of the terrible scars on its back.

Astir's eyes, burning flames of white and gold fire, looked down at Ignatius. “I came to you while he slept to warn you.”

“To warn me?”

Astir lay a large, slender hand on Ignatius' brow. “Vlad will return by sunrise. He has turned back out of fear.”

I looked sharply at the Fallen. “What do you mean?”

“He senses all is not well. His dreams disturb him and he fears.”

“For me?”

“Perhaps. But he returns.”

“Then I should return home,” I decided.

Astir continued to lean over Ignatius gazing down at him with those fiery eyes. “He loves you. He will do all he can to be with you and keep you at his side. But you weaken him and you are more dangerous than any weapon ever raised against him.”

“No,” I whispered. “No. I love him! I will not hurt him.”

Astir looked at me fully, those eyes burning even brighter. “Only one man truly knows you. Only one has seen all that you are capable of and truly knows your heart. He alone fully sees that you are formidable and clever. But he does not realize that you will destroy him.”

Astir’s words struck me forcibly and I shrank back from the Fallen. The creature leaned toward me, seeming taller, longer, and fiercer. Its eyes burned even more brilliantly than before and, to my amazement, wings made of fire erupted from its back.

“Your time for choice draws near. You must choose wisely or all will be lost. And even if you are victorious, you will taste bitterness and loss. And you will know in that moment that what you love you have destroyed.”

“No,” I whispered in a strangled voice.

I fled from the bed, terrified, and drew my dress hastily onto my body. “You know not what you speak of.”

The Fallen moved around the side of the bed to stand before me. It was majestic and terrible, and I fell to my knees.

“You do not fully understand what I speak of, child,” it hissed.

I screamed at it in horror. I felt its power, brutal in its truth, and I was afraid.

With my dress barely on my body, I ran from it and through a door.

A fierce and sudden cold enveloped me, and I felt myself fall.

Landing upon my hands, I looked up to see Magda staring down at me.

“Mistress?”

I leaped to my feet and whirled about. I stood in my own room, clad in a long dressing gown, my hair falling past my waist.

“Magda,” I said. “How did I-“

“Did you just now arrive? I did not hear you enter. I received your notice that you were trapped by the sun at the hotel,” she said as she looked at me fearfully, kneeling down to pick up my dress and shoes from the night before.

Clutching my gown tightly about me, I felt myself shivering. “Yes, yes, I just arrived. I would like a bath. I am quite cold.”

Magda nodded, her dark eyes regarding me with fearful curiosity.

I moved to the window and sat down in a chair, embracing myself as I trembled. I could hear Astir’s words clearly in my mind and they terrified me. I was afraid of the Fallen and its power. I had wanted to speak with it of God and heaven, but was afraid it would reveal that I was truly damned and beyond absolution. Now, I am more afraid than before. I cannot bear it if I am the

downfall of my beloved Ignatius.

As I now write this, fresh from my bath, I look back upon the events of last night and feel quite the fool. How could I not realize that the world I now inhabit is more dangerous than I could ever imagine? How could I not see that the joy I bring Ignatius is tinged with sadness? How did I believe I could love him and not cause us both pain?

I have been a fool and I am afraid.

Later -

After my last entry, I dressed in my favorite blue velvet dressing gown and sat writing a letter to my brother. I felt that this action would allow me to feel more like myself and at peace. I did not want to think of the terrifying Fallen and the words it had uttered as my beloved had slept.

I was nearly done with my letter when I heard a noise behind me. I turned in my chair and let out a gasp.

Ignatius sat on my bed clad in long trousers and a long black coat. His face was clean-shaven and his hair fell loosely to his waist.

“You left,” he said simply.

I lowered my eyes, for once utterly speechless.

Looking about my room, he sighed. “I woke to Astir being in the room. The Fallen said something to upset you, did he not?”

I felt tears in my eyes and dared not look up.

“He would not tell me what he had said to you, but told me that I should prepare myself for the worst. He would not tell me, of course, what that meant.”

“Does it speak the truth or lies?”

Ignatius regarded me warily. “The truth. Always. Though not as clearly as one would like.”

I wiped my tears away, dreadfully tormented at the thought that I could be the instrument that could destroy Ignatius. “I love you,” I said at last with a sob.

“And I you, but quite suddenly I feel as though you are lost to me.” His expression was quite pained, his jaw was tensely set. “And I do not understand why.”

“I would never do anything to hurt you. Never. I love you so much. I dream of being with you and only you,” I said in a rush of words.

“Yet, something has abruptly come between us. Something that Astir said to you has supplanted our happiness with this sense of dread.”

Covering my face with one hand, I sat in terrible silence. I was unsure of what to say, but I was overwhelmed with the thought that I could be Ignatius’ destruction.

I felt the cool touch of his hand on mine and looked up at him. He knelt slowly at my feet and gazed up at me. Touching his face lightly with my fingers, I tried to smile, but failed. Somberly, he lay his head on my lap as I rested my

palm against his silken hair.

“I was a priest once. I loved God from a very young age. I found solace in my village’s church and went there every day when my chores were done. I would sit in the presence of God and pray. Never did I doubt that God was there. Never did I doubt that I would one day serve Him,” he said softly.

Combing my fingers through his hair, I listened, tears flowing freely down my cheeks. I wanted to touch him, hear him, and know him.

“The priest spoke to my parents when I was still quite young. It was clear that I was called to the vocation and my parents released me into the care of the church. I studied diligently and toiled hard. I left behind all earthly desires and needs and worked hard for God and heaven.” He paused, his voice ripe with emotion, his hands resting on my lap. “I grew my hair long, as Samson did, as a reminder to myself that I should never love a woman. That I should not be weakened by the flesh. I took my vows of celibacy and poverty to the very core of my being. I pledged my love to God alone. In those days...” His voice grew soft. “In those days, I heard His voice and knew peace.”

I wept quietly over him, trying to soothe him, but knowing I could not.

“I was given my own little chapel in a small village. I loved the people and enjoyed the hard work. I sat with the elderly as they passed on from this world into the next and baptized the newborns as they entered into this world. I loved them all and it felt wonderful to walk through the village, sharing God’s love and encouraging them as they lived their hard lives.”

Silence revisited us as his words faded and he rested against me. At last, he took a breath and spoke again.

“One night, the village erupted into violence. A young woman was dragged through the streets by a horde of men that declared her a witch. She was quite slender and frail, with dark black hair and eyes the color of fresh grass. She was crying and terrified, her clothes tattered. They had found her sleeping in the home of one of the old women of the town. The old woman was dead and her neighbors were convinced the girl had stolen her soul. I could see the sheer fear on her face and ran to protect her. I ordered the townspeople back and took the girl into my little cottage outside the gates of the chapel. She clung to me, weeping silently. Once inside, she crawled into a corner and sat there shivering. I gave her soup and bread to eat, but she only whimpered and turned away.”

My hands grew still on his shoulder for I knew in my heart what happened next.

“It was the eve of winter and the days were quite short and dreary. She refused to go outside, I thought out of fear of the villagers. She never spoke and would only sip the weakest of meat broths. I was worried when she did not grow stronger, only weaker. I wrote letters to arrange her transfer to a nearby convent for I felt it unwise for me to keep her with me. Despite my vows, you see, I was taken with her beauty. Her eyes were so green, so vivid, and her lips so very,

very red. She was afraid of me and would not let me near her even to read to her from the Bible. So, I would sit near the fire, trying not to look at her where she lay curled on her cot.”

The room felt thick and heavy with emotion. I lifted my face to look away from his stricken form. I wiped away my tears and covered my eyes with one hand.

“One night, as I washed up before the fire, I looked up to see her kneeling near me. She was staring quite intently at me and for the first time she spoke to me. 'May I have a kiss,' she asked. I was quite startled at this request. I was half-naked with my robe and crucifix lying on the table nearby. Again, she said in her soft, beautiful voice, “May I have a kiss.” Ignatius slowly slid from my grasp to sit upon the floor, his back to me. He rested his head against his palm as he continued in a very low voice. “Thus I was tempted for the first time by the beauty of a woman. In that moment, I forgot God and only felt the heat she caused within me. I loved her. I leaned toward her and said to her, 'Yes, a kiss, but just one.' She kissed me and I was lost to her. Then I felt her sharp teeth in my throat and I fell back, holding her to me, terrified yet driven by my lust for her. She drank fully and deeply until my heart nearly faded. Then she said to me, 'Drink of me and know life eternal.' And I drank.”

I reached toward him, but hesitated. He was rubbing his mouth with his fingers as the memory tormented him.

“When I awoke I could no longer touch my crucifix. I could no longer enter my church. I no longer felt God’s loving presence. I was separated and apart from all that I had held dear. She sat beside me, renewed and even more beautiful. I was mad with anger and lust and thought to myself if I was to lose my soul to sin at least I had the pleasure of her.” His voice rasped with his anger. He turned abruptly toward me and I saw the fierceness in his eyes. “Then she asked me to help her return to her husband.”

I closed my eyes and covered my face. “Oh, Ignatius.”

“I serve her to this day. She and her husband. I love them both dearly. But when I heard her words I knew I had damned myself foolishly. I swore I would do penance until God once more let me feel His sweet presence and returned me to His service. I swore, Glynis, swore I would endure this hell as my own personal quest for salvation.”

Suddenly, he was over me, grasping my wrists and dragging me to my feet. “Then I saw you, and I loved you as I have never loved before. I lusted the one who made me. But you, dear God, I love you. You cut me to the quick of my being with your gaze. I feel such joy to be with you that I am lost once more. My penance is forgotten as I reveal in this sin that is my love for you, and I feel no shame!” He shook me hard, his long fangs flashing against his red lips. “I will not lose you to Astir’s damned prophecies!”

I wept with my sorrow, but I knew Astir’s words to be true. I did not

understand in what context the Fallen's prediction would come true, but I knew it would. I would destroy the one that loved me.

"Glynis, I love you," Ignatius said passionately.

"And I love you!"

He released my wrists and turned away. I took hold of his shoulders and pressed myself against his back.

"Then why do I feel you are lost to me," he whispered.

"My heart will never be lost to you. I could not take it back if I desired. I love you and nothing Astir says will change that, but I fear that I have caused you far more pain than you realize."

"I will not release you," Ignatius said firmly. He turned and took hold of my shoulders. "I will not! Astir be damned, I will not lose the one thing in this dark life that makes me feel joy."

I am a creature of strong will, but I could not withstand the onslaught of his emotion. My knees buckled as I collapsed against him. He swung me about and pinned me to the wall. Kissing me deeply, his hands slid beneath my robe. I instantly responded to his touch.

In our times together, we have always been passionate and fierce lovers, but this last time was desperate and hungry beyond anything I have ever experienced. As before, I knew I loved him and felt his love for me burning in his touch, but there was much more to this almost violent coupling. In retrospect, as I write this, I realize now we both feared it would be the last time we would be together.

When we stood gasping, shuddering, and kissing in the aftermath, I thought I would die if I could never touch him again. The feel of him deep inside of me was an act I did not want to share with any other. It felt right and beautiful, and I did not want this most intimate act to end. Kissing his lips, I whispered to him that I loved him.

"I will fight for you. I will fight Astir's prediction and anyone who would dare to try separate us," Ignatius said to me fiercely.

"Even Vlad," I asked.

"I will kill him for you," he said at last.

"You cannot. You said so yourself."

"I am strong enough," he answered me, kissing my neck lovingly.

"But there is a reason you are not telling me as to why you cannot, should not, kill him," I said to him.

"Yes." He buried his face in my neck and whispered. "Yes. Because my Mistress, who also created him, has forbidden it."

"I thought Erzsébet created him," I said with a gasp.

"No, Erzsébet is also a creation of my Mistress. She brought Vlad to us and it was my Mistress who created him. It is her power, you see, that keeps him subdued within his own country. That is why he seeks to go to England. To

escape her influence and her strength.”

“Then he is as trapped as I?”

Ignatius pressed his lips to my cheek, and said against my skin, “We are all trapped by intrigues beyond our control.”

My fingers played against his skin as I looked deeply into his dark blue eyes. All I saw there was a mirror my own love and need. I realized then that we could never part willingly from one another.

I felt the cold tendrils of Vlad’s power trace down my back and I gasped.

“What is it?”

“Vlad,” I whispered.

Ignatius snarled and drew back from me reluctantly. “Now is too soon to confront him.”

“We shall speak of this later,” I said firmly.

“Glynis, I will not lose you even though deep within myself I feel you are already lost,” Ignatius said in a voice vibrant with emotion.

I cupped his face in my hands and kissed him deeply. “I love you and that is all that matters in this moment.”

Grabbing me about the waist, he kissed me once more then suddenly was gone from my grasp.

In an almost eerie imitation of Astir’s haven, Magda rushed into the room with buckets of hot scented water.

“Hurry, my mistress, hurry,” she said in a frightened voice.

“You feel his approach,” I asked.

“All who have tasted his blood can,” she answered.

Helping me into the bath, she noted the bruises and scratches on my flesh where Ignatius had gripped me. “You must heal.”

“I need blood,” I answered.

“Then drink,” she said, offering me her wrist.

Oh, dearest Magda, I did not realize until that moment what a great ally she was to me. But I did drink and I did heal. She scrubbed my skin nearly raw and tried to make sure all signs of Ignatius were erased from my room.

By the time Vlad appeared in my doorway, flushed and fierce, I sat calmly at my desk finishing my letter to my brother.

“Come here,” Vlad ordered in a dark voice.

I rose slowly and approached him, my fresh clean red dressing gown sweeping the floor behind me. He reached out and gripped my throat tightly in one hand. His nails bit into my tender flesh as I whimpered.

In one swift, violent motion, he dragged me against him and kissed me roughly. I merely allowed him to kiss me and did not respond to his passion. His fingers painfully took hold of my hair as he dragged back my head and bit into my throat. He drank two great draughts, then violently released me, letting me fall to the ground.

“I taste only you,” he said at last.

“What else would you taste?” I demanded angrily.

“I dreamed you were with...” He hesitated, and I knew he had almost spoken a name., “...another.”

“I drink from men and woman all the time. Why would you fret now?”

Vlad laughed: a dark sinister sound. “I dreamt you were with another vampire.”

I scoffed at this. “You have never introduced me to any vampires other than my sisters.”

He loomed over me, great and dark, terrifying and powerful. “I will not share you with any other. Do you understand? No mortal, no vampire. No one.”

I lay on the floor where he had dropped me, gazing up at him. “Yes, I understand.”

Like a great bird, he swooped down on me, his cape flowing out around us, darkening the room for a moment. His green eyes were vivid and full of anger. “I dreamed that you betrayed me. I will not allow that. I cannot. You are my wife.”

“The first among your Brides,” I corrected.

“No. My only Bride. I denounce the others. Let them rot in their hunger. You alone are my wife from this night on and I will not share you with any other,” Vlad said firmly.

“You do not love me and do not pretend to. You are only tired of my sisters and will soon find yourself more brides such as the Baroness.”

Vlad laughed at this. “And you will still be my first.”

“I am your pawn. I know this. I consider myself nothing more than that.”

“Then you are wrong,” Vlad said with a chuckle.

I shrugged, attempting to not seem as terrified as I felt.

With the swiftness of a cobra, he once more held my throat captive in his cold hand. “You are mine. Do not forget this.”

Then he was gone from my room with the swirl of his cape and a dark laugh.

Now, he sleeps in our secret room. I will soon join him for the sun is above the horizon and despite the safety of our darkened home, I can feel the suns power pressing down on me to slumber.

What does this all mean? I do not know.

There is a great sorrow in my heart as I fear I shall never be with my beloved Ignatius again. Considering the dark prophecy of the Fallen, perhaps this is for the best. I could not bear to be the instrument of Ignatius’ end.

Now Vlad is suspicious of me and I fear he will thwart me if I attempt to see Ignatius.

Of course, to complicate matters even more, Ignatius and Vlad are of the same blood! This is all madness! Madness! And I, of course, have somehow found my way to the center of the storm.

Chapter 32

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

25th of April, 1820

Buda, Hungary

Perhaps it is part of my new nature to have terrible dreams. I have had nightmares since the night I was created by Vlad's blood. But the last few nights since Vlad's return the dreams have been vicious and terrifying.

To my dismay, I am dreaming of the sisters.

Tonight I awakened screaming. Vlad sat beside me, his arms resting on his knees. His face was drawn and his green eyes glimmered with dark fires. Instinctively, I knew that he, too, had dreamed of the three women he has abandoned to starvation.

The dream had been terrible. In it I had been ravenously hungry and clawing at the door to the castle attempting to escape. My hands were shriveled and gray, my nails long and clawed. In my greatly weakened state, I was unable to even splinter the heavy wood.

In the dream I was screaming in agony. My teeth were long and sharp and were shredding my dried lips. My mouth was parched and my throat felt painfully dry. As my voice rose into a shriek, I felt the flesh on my face crack and split.

And in my dream, I felt a horrible despair that the man I loved had abandoned me and all was lost. I would wither away as the hunger ate at me until nothing was left, and I was filled with terror.

It was then I had awakened.

Rolling onto my side, I wept into my pillow, the horror of the dream still gripping me. Vlad remained unmoving beside me. I could feel his anger seeping from him to infect the atmosphere of the room.

"You cannot just leave them starving," I finally dared to say. "How can you do this to Cneajna?"

"Do not speak her name to me," Vlad snapped.

"But she loves you. She loves me. I dreamed of her and-" I was cut off when he slapped me.

"We will not speak of her again. Or of the other two," Vlad said in a low voice. He lay beside me and put his arm about my waist to pull me hard against his body. "Sleep and forget them. Our time draws near."

Weeping softly, I covered my face with my hand and found no solace in sleep or wakefulness. At last I rose to write this entry. I cannot truly rest knowing that the sisters are in such dreadful agony.

Later -

So much has happened since I began this entry just a few hours ago. I am still shaking and terrified. I can barely believe what I have just endured. I am writing to calm myself and draw my thoughts together.

In such a short time all that I have known has been destroyed.

I finally did sleep again after my nightmare of the sisters. Vlad woke me a few hours later, and I rose up to see that he was already dressed.

“The Baroness has invited us to join her at her home tonight,” he said in a low voice. His hair and mustache were neatly trimmed, and his bright green eyes regarded me thoughtfully.

I made a face at this announcement. I had no desire to see his mistress. The last few nights had been draining as Vlad and I spent hours planning our move to England. Already he has our trip across the continent mapped, and we’ve spent hours conversing in English. His accent is strange and he has a tendency to word things oddly, but he is improving quickly.

I never really had a moment to myself and Vlad seemed to deliberately stay at my side. Of course, this meant I could not go meet Ignatius in the hotel garden so I resented that I was going to be forced to visit with Vlad’s mistress.

Vlad laughed at my pout, leaning toward me. “You are so very contrary.”

“You have no idea,” I retorted.

“Oh, I believe I do.” He stood up slowly and ran his hand over my cheek. “Dress in your finest. Let the Baroness see your full beauty tonight.”

I fear an evil little glint flashed into my eyes.

“I did not realize you were so jealous, my dear wife,” he said with amusement.

I drew away from him and pouted. “I would just rather she understand that she is not my competition.”

“Of course she is not,” Vlad chided me. “Even if she does seem to believe that. She could never compete with you, my flame haired bride.” He caught me by my hair and drew me against him. Kissing the back of my neck, his hands slid over my body.

I growled at him irritably. “If you wish me to dress then stop that.” I drew away from him and fled from our secret chamber.

He caught me in the foyer and twirled me about. His kiss was searing as I beat my hands against his chest. Twining his hands in my hair, he whispered against my lips. “You are the first. Remember that.”

“Only when it serves my purposes,” I retorted.

He laughed, releasing me. I stomped my foot at him, then turned and fled up the stairs.

I found Magda in my room waiting for me. She was laying out one of my favorite dresses. “The Count told me to make sure you looked your very best tonight,” she said nervously.

With a bit of a frown, I fell into the chair next to my vanity. “Yes, he is dragging me off to some ridiculous gathering with his mistress.”

Magda’s expression was grave as she began to brush out my hair.

“It is unfortunate that he does not leave you behind,” she said in a low voice, and I understood the hidden meaning. I wondered how much she actually knew about Ignatius and me. I dared not ask.

“Yes, I know. I’m rather tired of being tied to his side.”

Magda began to twist my hair up into a fancy design. “He has been a bit possessive since his return.”

“He suspects me,” I answered truthfully.

“And yet he is open with his mistress.” She adorned my red tresses with jeweled hair clips and a fancy green ostrich feather.

I shrugged. “I really do not care about her.” Unfortunately, I knew that was not fully true. I actually despised the Baroness and felt threatened by her to some degree. Of course, she had also betrayed my family and I hated her viciously for that. But, if I was honest with myself, the mere thought of Vlad turning her into a vampire made me quite angry.

“That woman is evil,” Magda hissed.

“Why do you say that?” I glanced back at Magda. She seemed quite upset.

“She used to visit often before Vlad brought you here. He used to spend a lot of time with her before you became his wife. She used to do terrible things to the servants and he would let her.”

I saw that her hands were shaking. “Magda, did she hurt you?”

My faithful servant reached out and took my hands. I felt a pang of guilt that I had never realized the depth of her devotion until just a few nights ago.

“I know you are a good woman. You have never treated us badly. You have made Vlad act like a true Master and not a brute. We used to live in terrible fear when he would come to the house, but now, it is so much better for all of us.” Magda’s brow furrowed. “But that woman, that awful woman, please, do not let her befriend you or try to return to his good graces.”

I held her hands firmly. “I despise her. Do not worry about her. And, of course, you shall be treated well. I will insist on nothing less.”

Magda looked close to tears. “But you will leave to England and we shall be here. What if he gives us to her?”

“I will insist that he keeps this home,” I lied. I actually had other plans for the house once I killed Vlad. I was determined to return to Buda and take the house as my own until I could arrange to leave for England.

Magda looked a little relieved, but her brow was still creased with worry. “In all the years I have served Vlad, only this time with you as our mistress has been peaceful and good.”

“I am glad to hear that I have brought some measure of happiness to your life,” I said, my voice thick with emotion. I was very touched by her words.

“Perhaps he will eventually allow us to take our sips of blood from you and not him,” she said after a beat.

“Why does he have you drink his blood?” I looked at her questioningly as she helped me into my bright green silk dress.

“So that we are bound to him,” she answered.

“But you helped me the other night,” I said.

“My family has served him for hundreds of years. We have always drunk of his blood and it sustains us. We live long and are rarely ill. But, when we drink, we are strongly bound to his wishes. He has not given me his blood in almost a year. I think perhaps he trusts that I will do as he wishes without his blood.” As she talked, her nimble fingers worked to fasten my dress.

“I thank you for helping me,” I said in a low voice.

She moved around me, fluffing my bows and lace. “I thank you for being a true and kind mistress.”

We shared a moment of camaraderie I have rarely had with any servant, and I felt an immense fondness for her. What followed was a pang of guilt when I realized I did not even know if she was married or had children. I knew absolutely nothing about her except she was devoted to me.

The door swung open and Vlad’s presence filled the room. I was a little surprised at how modern and handsome he appeared tonight. Obviously, he had taken the time to trim his hair and mustache and it made his face seem much more pleasant. Of course, I knew that was a lie, but it was still rather remarkable.

“You look lovely. We should depart now that you are ready,” Vlad said.

Magda quickly tied one more ribbon in my hair and then hurried to get my cloak.

I walked toward Vlad slowly, my gaze fastened on him rather intently. “Why are we going to this party tonight?”

“Why are you so suspicious? Perhaps it is time for us to socialize with others as a married couple,” Vlad answered.

“Oh, please. You do nothing without some sort of ulterior motive. You plot everything.”

“You do know me well, do you not?”

“Far more than I like,” I admitted.

Magda brought my cloak and helped fasten it about my throat. She looked anxious. When I departed on Vlad’s arm, I saw that she was clutching her hands tightly, her knuckles completely white.

“I would truly like to know why we are going to the Baroness’ home tonight,” I said as we walked down the stairs to the foyer. “I do not like it when you plot and leave me in darkness.”

Vlad turned on his heel to regard me thoughtfully, then shook his head. “No, it is best if you do not know. I am not in the mood for one of your temper tantrums.”

“I beg your pardon? Temper tantrum?” I stomped my foot. “Truly you think ill of me.”

With a laugh, he helped me into the carriage and took his place beside me.

I gave him my most sour expression. “Of course, you will not be a decent man and let me know of your plans.”

“Of course not. Besides, you have never considered me to be a decent man,” Vlad said with a laugh.

I growled at him and settled down into the seat as the carriage lurched forward.

“Perhaps I have decided it is time for you to know the truth about certain matters that pertain to you,” he said at last.

I regarded him with great curiosity, but he ignored me.

The Dosza Palace was not the shimmering spectacle it had been the night of the opera, but it was still quite glorious to behold as we approached. As the carriage drew up to the steps, Vlad reached out to touch my hand, his fingers tracing over the red stone in the ring he had given me.

“Remember, you are Countess Dracula. None other carries that title,” he said firmly.

I regarded him in silence, attempting to discern a hidden meaning. The door to the carriage opened and we disembarked.

Brice met us in the foyer. “Please, follow me,” he said in a low voice, and I noticed that he barely glanced at me.

Freed of our cloaks, we followed Brice into a parlor where the Baroness was already visiting with other guests. Sir Stephen and his wife, Maria were seated on a couch talking softly with the Baroness.

As we entered the room, the Baroness slid to her feet and put on her most dazzling smile. I thought this amusing since all their expressions had been quite dire when we had entered.

“Count and Countess Dracula, how wonderful for you to join us tonight,” she gushed.

Vlad allowed her to greet him warmly and I followed suit.

The Baroness looked beautiful in her red gown and red ostrich turban. She clasped her hands to her bosom and her diamond bracelets and rings caught the light like white fire.

“We are most pleased to be here,” Vlad said in response, then moved to greet Sir Stephen and Maria.

A fierce anger enveloped me as I stood among those who had betrayed and murdered my family. My jaw set firmly as I moved to greet the other guests, putting on my best face despite my rage.

“It was so delightful to meet your brother,” the Baroness said with a bright smile.

“He enjoyed your party immensely.”

“It was a shame he departed so soon.”

Maria was staring at me openly and I realized she had never seen me without a veil. Her support of Vlad’s story of my disfigurement had helped us deceive my brother, but now I wondered if she had always known all along that it was a lie.

The idle conversation began to die down, and I realized that the humans were quite nervous. I looked toward Vlad and raised an eyebrow.

“She did not invite us here,” I said at last.

Vlad smiled at me as he took a chair near the fire. He settled into it as if it was a throne. “No, I summoned them here.”

The pretense was over and the mortals looked even more nervous than before.

“We are at your disposal,” Sir Stephen said quickly. “Whatever you desire.”

Maria stepped back behind her husband and cast a wary glance in my direction.

The Baroness laughed a little nervously. “Oh, come now. We are all friends.”

“You are my servants,” Vlad said in a low voice.

The Baroness smile faded as she immediately turned and curtsied to him. “Of course, Master. Forgive me.” She bowed her head and took a step back from him, her fingers fidgeting with her skirt.

Vlad sat comfortably in the chair, his hands folded over his chest. “Let us speak openly before my wife. It is time she understood all that has transpired.”

The Baroness sat down sharply in a chair and looked toward me with fearful eyes.

Maria took her place next to her husband, her hand taking hold of his.

Sir Stephen looked absolutely terrified and he gulped visibly.

“It is time, Glynis, that you understand the role these humans played in bringing you to me and making you my wife.”

“You told me that Sir Stephen summoned my family here with the intent of turning me over to you,” I said as I took my place next to his chair. I leaned my elbow on the back of it and stared at the mortals. I knew Sir Stephen’s role in the demise of my family from what Vlad had told me, but I made a mental note that I must act surprised about the Baroness’ participation.

“He summoned several families here,” Vlad said. “Did you take notice of all the English who were visiting when your family was?”

Sir Stephen looked down at his hands and frowned a little.

I thought back to all the social events I had attended in Buda then slowly nodded. “Yes, actually, I remember a few other families were also visiting at that time.”

“It was the Baroness who felt I should pursue you. She made an effort to meet all the young English ladies. Out of all of them, she chose you. She visited me and spoke glowingly of your beauty and charms. Soon after, I sought you out at the opera.” Vlad smiled as the Baroness squirmed in her chair. “Is that not

correct?'

"Of course. She is quite lovely and I felt she would compliment your imposing stature with her vivacious personality.

"Of course, Sir Stephen did as I ordered because he fears me and is loyal," Vlad said with a bit of a smirk. "Also, his daughter, Laura, is about to return from boarding school in Switzerland and he was fearful I would chose her."

Sir Stephen paled, and Maria looked absolutely terrified.

"We would have been honored if you had chosen her," Maria said swiftly.

"So you did know all along that the veils were a lie," I snapped at her.

Maria looked at her husband, then at Vlad. At last she said, "If you understood what a great man your husband is you would not feel any reservations--"

"He murdered my family!"

My voice was sharp and cold.

Vlad did not even look in my direction. "Therefore, all of the mortals before you have assisted me in drawing you to me and ensuring our safe passage to England. And for that, I am quite grateful."

The Baroness forced a bright smile. "It is our pleasure."

Sir Stephen looked up and said in a low voice, "I am in your service."

Maria nodded her head, clutching Stephen's hand.

"I thank you for your service and now I release all of you. Stephen, I am transferring all my business to a new solicitor and Baroness, though your parties are a delight and my wife and I shall attend any we are invited to, consider our dealings at an end."

The expression on the faces of the mortals was one of absolute shock and terror.

"Count Dracula," Sir Stephen said in a tremulous voice. "I am at your service! I will do as you say. Have I not done all you requested?"

Vlad stood up and reached out to touch my cheek. "Yes, you have. But your services are no longer required."

My anger was pulsating inside of me. I could have slain all of them right then and there. Vlad took my hand to calm me. As we left the room together, he turned and said, "Do with them as you please. But with discretion."

"You cannot do this!"

I turned to look at the Baroness. Her expression was desperate. She was moving toward us, one hand outstretched.

"Vlad, please," she whispered.

He slapped her hand away, then slapped her cheek. She fell to the floor weeping.

I stared at her with wide, unblinking eyes. I wanted to kill them all in that very moment, but Vlad was drawing me away.

Sir Stephen held his wife tightly in his arms as she wept in desperate fear. I

could feel no pity for any of them. I felt cold, raw anger pulsating through me. Because of them my family was dead and I was a vampire. Now that Vlad had released them, I could feel my blood lust rising.

“Not now,” Vlad said firmly, guiding me away from the parlor.

As we walked toward the front doors, Brice appeared, pacing us. He did not utter a word, but opened the door for us, bowing slightly. As I passed him, he looked up at me and I gave him a slight nod.

Slipping into our cloaks, Vlad and I exited the palace toward our waiting carriage.

“They are yours now. Do as you please. Not tonight, but another.”

As he lifted me into the carriage, I reached out to touch his face. “Why, Vlad?”

He lowered me back to the ground to take me in his arms. “To keep you from trying to kill me,” he said with a smirk. “Or maybe because you deserve revenge.”

I gazed up at him and then slowly blinked. “This does not assuage my anger toward you.”

“I would expect nothing less,” he answered me. His green eyes glimmered with deep emotion that I could not fathom nor discern. Pressing his full lips against my forehead, he held me to him for a moment.

“You are an odd man,” I decided, pulling away from him. Climbing into the carriage, I turned back to give him a fierce look.

“And you are a contrary woman,” he answered, joining me in the carriage.

Settling into the seat, I drew my cloak around me and forced myself to focus. My eyes were hot and unblinking. I could feel the blood lust raging in my veins. I wanted desperately to enter the palace and slaughter them all. Then I could set Brice free and perhaps find some measure of peace.

But Vlad stayed my hand and that aggravated me.

“Revenge should be savored,” Vlad said after a long moment of silence.

I snorted at this, but he had a point. Fluffing my skirt, I looked out the window as the carriage rolled down the drive and down toward the heart of Buda.

“It is time for a new beginning and to dispatch the past. It is time for us both to embrace our new existence. We shall be free in England. We shall be powerful together,” Vlad continued in a low voice. His hand slid under mine and he held it loosely. “Can you not see that?”

I slowly looked at him, my gaze quite steady. “Perhaps.” My thoughts were of revenge. I would kill his mortal servants he had so kindly released to me. After that, I would then find a way to kill him. Then, at last, I would be free to be with Ignatius.

“I shall give you all you desire,” Vlad promised.

Ignoring him, I watched as the carriage turned down a narrow lane. We

passed an overturned cart that had cut off our passage home. Two men were attempting to right it.

“You shall see that I can make amends for what happened to your family. I will grant you the life they desired for you,” his voice droned on.

The squalid housing of the poor rose up around us. The stench of the streets assailed my senses.

“I realize you do not understand fully all that you are, but I shall correct this,” Vlad’s voice continued in his native tongue.

Keeping my back to him, I watched the dismal dwellings slip past the window. I heard something and turned my head slightly trying to concentrate on the sound.

It sounded like a man speaking in English.

“I shall return you to the life you deserve,” Vlad vowed, then kissed my hand.

“You mean the life you stole,” I said sharply, turning toward him.

Then fire enveloped the carriage.

Chapter 33

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright - Continued

Glass shattered, then flames roared up and engulfed me. I screamed in pain as my dress caught fire. Vlad ripped me from the seat and tossed me onto the floor. Using his cloak, he tried to put out my dress as I continued to shriek in pain. Flames licked the interior of the carriage, the ceiling setting afire.

The horses screamed as the carriage crazily rolled about. We slammed into a building when the carriage lurched to one side. Vlad hooked one hand under my arm and with his other hand ripped the burning door off its hinges and hurled it away. Flinging me out of the carriage before him, we fell into the street.

The horses fought with the reins, making the small carriage careen wildly from side to side. The driver was pitched headlong into the street. The carriage began to shatter apart into burning wreckage. The terrified horses raced away into the misty night with the remains of the carriage trailing in fiery debris behind them.

Vlad rose to his feet and staggered to the driver. The man was quite dead, his neck broken.

Again, there was the shatter of glass and flames sprang up around me. I screamed in terror and Vlad was instantly at my side. Grabbing me tightly, he sprang into the night air. The loud cracks of rifles filled the night and sharp, terrible stabs pierced my torso. I choked as blood flowed from my lips.

Looking down, I saw the vampire hunters on the rooftops of the homes of the poor wielding torches and rifles. We had been ambushed.

Vlad swung low over the rooftops and onto the shingles of a large building. I vomited blood all over him as I staggered, unable to stand. With horror, I realized my dress was burned to tatters and that my arm and chest were blackened. The pain was immense. Wounds were seeping blood and I realized I had been shot more than once. Vlad, too, was injured, but not nearly as badly as I.

“Vlad,” I gasped, falling to my knees.

It was not Vlad who caught me, but Ignatius. His arms came about me and he gently lowered me to the roof. His dark blue eyes were full of fear. I almost uttered his name before I realized what folly that would be.

“Vlad, you must feed her at once,” Ignatius said urgently.

Vlad fell to his knees beside me, his hand sliding over my hair. He gave Ignatius a sharp look, and said in a demanding voice, “What are you doing here?”

“I happened to be in the area when I saw what remained of your carriage go rushing past,” Ignatius answered. “I immediately hurried to find and assist you.” His dark blue eyes were eerily bright and he looked fierce.

Vlad growled, “Such consideration, brother, for the safety of one you despise.”

Gripping my unburned hand tightly, Ignatius glared at Vlad. “I despise you no more than I do myself. Now, feed her and let us be off before the dhamphir comes.”

Vlad slashed his neck. “Drink, Glynis, and heal.”

Weakly, I wrapped my arm about Vlad’s shoulders and pressed my lips to his throat. His blood filled my mouth and soon I was gulping down great draughts of the rich, thick vitae.

“Do not let her drink too much, Vlad,” Ignatius urged. “You must be strong enough to fight.”

I could feel Ignatius’ hand holding mine tenderly as I drank. Vlad growled at Ignatius angrily, and I felt my secret lover reluctantly withdraw his hand.

After a moment, Vlad pulled me away from his throat. Cradling me against him, Vlad gently stroked my face. “Heal, Glynis.”

Closing my eyes, I pushed back the pain and concentrated on the fresh blood inside of me. I willed it to heal my body and salve the agony. Slowly, I felt the savage pain begin to fade away.

Opening my eyes, I saw great flakes of blackened skin fall from my arm and chest to reveal fresh, new white skin. The wounds from the bullets were closing and the tiny metal bits fell from my flesh onto the roof.

Ignatius reached down and plucked a misshapen bullet from the roof. “Blessed and inscribed with crosses,” he said in a low voice as his fingers began to smolder. He tossed away the pellet and turned to look upon me. I could see the torment in his eyes. He wanted so badly to console me, but Vlad was there, watching us. I could sense my Master’s suspicion.

Vlad slid out of his cloak and wrapped it about me. He was clearly anxious to cover my nakedness.

“Who is this man?” I asked him. It seemed the correct thing to ask now that I was healed.

“My vampire brother,” he answered curtly.

His tone frightened me.

Ignatius rose to his feet and moved to the edge of the roof to survey the area around us. His long hair rippled on the night wind and his eyes glowed as he squatted down. “The hunters are on the move.”

Vlad helped me to my feet. He ran his hand over my cheek, brushing away the charred flesh. “I am taking my wife home immediately.”

Ignatius turned, looking at Vlad sharply. The animosity between the two was palatable. “That is most likely best considering that a dhamphir has been spotted in the city. She is still too weak to fight for herself,” he agreed.

My hair fell around my face and I dared to look toward Ignatius through the tangle of my red curls. I wanted to flee into his arms, but I dared not. Tears filled my eyes as I looked upon the man I loved. He turned away as though in pain.

Vlad gripped me by the arm and pulled me along after him. I stumbled a little and grabbed hold of my Master to steady myself. Glancing back at Ignatius, I saw that he was following us. His long face was stricken with emotion. When he saw me look back upon him, he slightly nodded. My limbs trembled as I nodded back. We both were in agreement. This was not our time to move against Vlad.

The voices of the hunters drifted up to us as they spread through the streets attempting to track us. I could hear one man’s voice raised above the others. Svend was once more leading his vampire hunters into battle.

“Move along, Glynis,” Vlad ordered me. He jerked hard on my hand and I stumbled, crashing to the rooftop.

“I am weak,” I hissed at him.

“Very well,” he answered.

Sweeping me up into his arms, Vlad leaped from roof to another. I clung to him as we soared into the night wind, then fell back onto another rooftop. Ignatius followed us easily, then darted ahead to make sure the way was clear.

“This way,” Ignatius ordered.

Vlad once more leaped and a few shots rang out as the hunters below fired at us. One shot ripped through Vlad’s arm and he nearly dropped me. Ignatius immediately took flight, gripped Vlad tightly by the arm, and flung us onto another rooftop. I fell on the slanted roof, and grabbed hold of the shingles, gasping with fright. Vlad moved to quickly fish the pellet out of his arm with his fingers, gritting his teeth at the pain. The stench of burning flesh filled the air as he struggled. Ignatius dared to help me to my feet as Vlad tossed away the bullet with an angry grunt.

I held tightly to Ignatius arms, finding solace in his touch. “Thank you,” I managed before Vlad’s strong arm came about my waist and heaved me up against him. Again, he leaped into the air and sailed over the heads of the vampire hunters. For a moment, I saw the young Irish hunter gazing up at me then we landed atop an office building.

“We should fly,” Ignatius decided when he landed behind us. “The dhamphir be damned. Glynis barely evaded him before, but the three of us should be a match for him.”

Vlad turned, looking at Ignatius fiercely. I trembled in Vlad’s grip, my eyes wide with fright.

Ignatius turned slowly toward us as he realized what he had said. “You told me your wife barely evaded a dhamphir, Vlad. Is that not so?”

Vlad looked confused, obviously trying to remember if he had mentioned such a thing to his vampire brother. “Yes, she barely evaded him.” He gripped me so tightly, I felt him crushing my bones. I whimpered in pain. He struggled internally with some disturbing thought, then finally said, “Help me with her.”

Ignatius strode back to us and took hold of my other hand. At Vlad’s lead, we all leaped into the night air. I felt both of the men pushing their power outward, hiding us from the eyes below. The wind whistled in my ears as I clung to both of them. I was still weak despite my wounds being healed. I had lost far too much blood to be sated with one short feeding.

Swooping over the city, Vlad lead us toward our estate. He lessened his hold on my hand and I managed to heal my shattered bones. I felt dizzy from the exertion. Feeling rather lightheaded, I foolishly lamented my tattered dress as it flapped around me.

None of us saw the weapon that sent Vlad spiraling out of the sky. He released my hand as the silver dagger struck his shoulder. I watched my Master fall to the earth below as Ignatius gathered me up in his arms. Moving swiftly through the air, we darted down into the trees. Branches tried to snag us, but my lover was swift and sure and kept us from being entangled.

Gliding through the foliage, Ignatius held me protectively in his embrace. There was a great commotion to the side of us, and I gasped in fear. Vlad's roar of rage filled the night.

“Foul beast!” It was a woman's voice, full of hate.

A shivered in fear and weakness as the sound of battle erupted nearby. Suddenly, a female dressed in men’s clothing sailed through the air near us and into the boughs of a tree. Her body caught in the branches, resembling a rag doll tossed away by a petulant child. Long black hair was woven into a braid and it swung around her head as her form swayed in the boughs of the tree. Her throat was ripped out and her eyes were devoid of life. With an almost surreal slowness, she slipped through the branches of the tree to the ground below.

“Another dhamphir,” Ignatius whispered in my ear.

His touch was tender as I turned to gaze fully into his face. I parted my lips to speak when I was torn from his grip.

A scream almost left my lips until I realized it was Vlad who held me.

“To the ground,” he ordered.

When we landed I saw the female dhamphir sprawled nearby. Irrationally, I feared she would somehow spring to life to pursue us. But she remained dead, staring blindly toward us. I had to turn away.

“Vlad, they are everywhere,” Ignatius said in a fierce whisper.

“We keep moving,” Vlad answered tersely.

Gripping my hand, Vlad ran through the trees, dragging me along behind him. Ignatius kept pace with us, leaping with great ease over gnarled roots. Though I tried, I could barely keep up with Vlad and stumbled a few times. I felt utterly weak and helpless. I cried out with frustration. Kindly, Ignatius reached out to grip my other hand and helped me keep up. Vlad snarled with anger, but he did not fight Ignatius’ assistance. He understood how desperately in danger we were.

When we reached the wall that encircled the estate, Vlad leaped up to perch on top. I landed next to him and teetered. The weakness in my limbs was dismaying, but Ignatius’ touch was comforting as he steadied me.

Gazing through the dark silhouette of the trees we saw the house on fire. Great flames were engulfing the structure I had come to love as my home. Through the smoke and fire, I could see our servants trying to defend themselves against the vampire hunters. To my dismay, I could see that they were losing as they were struck down with guns and daggers.

With a gasp, I covered my mouth in horror. “Vlad, stop them!”

Vlad was silent, his green eyes taking in the chaos that loomed just beyond the edges of the trees. At last he turned to Ignatius and me. “We must flee Buda.”

Ignatius started to protest, then faltered. “Of course.”

“Arminius is among them,” Vlad said in a low voice and pointed.

A dark shape against the flames carried a large crucifix. It was the priest I had seen before when the mad vampire had been struck down.

“He will never give up hunting you,” Ignatius answered in a grim tone.

“No, he will not. Neither will his apprentices.” Vlad shook his head and turned to me. “I am sorry, Glynis, but our time here is at an end. We must go.”

A woman’s scream pierced the night. I gripped Vlad’s arm tightly as I saw the familiar form of my maid atop the house. She was clinging to the roof above my room and to my horror I saw the small shape of a child with her. Two vampire hunters, braving the fire, attempted to drag them off the shingles.

“Grab the bride of the devil,” someone shouted from below. “Throw her and the spawn down.”

“Vlad, its Magda!”

Vlad turned to Ignatius as he reluctantly released my arm. “Take Glynis to

the stables of Sir Stephen. Wait for me there.”

Ignatius hesitated, then nodded. “Of course.”

Vlad took hold of the back of my neck and stared deep into my eyes before he gave me a quick, harsh kiss. Releasing me, he flung himself into the air and vanished from sight as he drew his power about him.

Taking hold of my hand, Ignatius leaped down just beyond the ivy-laden wall where we had made love not too long ago. In silence, he pulled me along behind him. Though we moved swiftly, he was tender and mindful of my weakness. As we hurried, I could feel him shielding both of us. I knew we were but a mere shadow slipping in and out of the darkness.

Running more swiftly than any mortal, we made our way down the darkened streets to Sir Stephen’s estate. The gates were open and Ignatius hesitated.

“We could flee together,” he said softly.

I looked at him desperately, my mind whirling with the possibility. “Should we?”

Ignatius looked torn and afraid. “We could chance it. We could flee to another country. We will have to move swiftly.”

“But with his blood in me, if he beckons me...” I felt tears on my face. “If he calls to me...”

Ignatius nodded, his face tense, and he dared to kiss me.

I clung to him, my lips worshipping his. Our kiss was desperate, yet full of love.

He drew back with an anguished expression. “We shall find a way to break his power over you. I swear it, my love.”

“I love you,” I whispered.

He smiled ruefully, then guided me down the long lane toward the stables.

Our hands clasped tightly, we reached the stables. All was quiet and still here. The vampire hunters were no where to be seen. Ignatius touched my cheek gently.

“We shall find safety soon,” he promised.

Vlad emerged from the darkness holding Magda in one arm and a small boy in the other. Magda sobbed and coughed as he guided her toward us. Covered in soot and reeking of smoke, she collapsed to the ground when they reached us. I went to her instantly, falling to my knees.

“Mistress, mistress...” she cried when she saw me.

Ignatius took the small boy in his arms. Drawing a handkerchief from his pocket, he wiped the child’s dirty face. The boy stared blankly as tears fell silently down his cheeks. He was struck dumb with fear and my heart broke for him.

Vlad did not say a word, but set about drawing some horses from the stable. I watched him, fearful of his expression.

Ignatius gently lowered the boy into Magda’s arms and she held the child

tightly as she wept. The little boy stirred out of his daze and buried his face in her neck as he wrapped his tiny arms about her.

Ignatius moved to help Vlad saddle the horses. They worked in silence, barely acknowledging each other, but working efficiently. I held Magda's hand as I tried to calm her, but my own fear threatened to overwhelm my senses.

At last, the horses were ready.

“The woman and her child are to go to Astir,” Vlad said to Ignatius.

I was not certain what this meant and began to protest, but Ignatius said quickly, “I will make sure he gives her a good position in his household.”

Vlad nodded. “Once I am at the castle, I will send him compensation if he desires it. She alone survived the slaughter of my servants and deserves to be treated well.”

Ignatius agreed silently and moved toward Magda.

“Please, sir, let me go with you and my Mistress,” Magda begged Vlad.

“It is best you go with my brother,” Vlad answered her. “You will not be harmed.”

I kissed Magda’s cheek and tried to console her. “All will be well,” I promised her.

“Please, let me go with you. Please!”

I doubt Vlad was touched by her pleas, but he hesitated, then said, “We shall take you to your new haven. It shall be to my advantage for I need to appeal to Astir for a carriage and a driver.”

Ignatius helped me get Magda to her feet. The child clung to her so tightly we did not dare try to remove him. Ignatius swung up onto one of the horses and reached down for her and the child. I lifted them easily, despite my weakened condition. My maid settled into the strong arms of my lover.

“Should we be attacked again, flee immediately. I will find you,” Vlad instructed me.

I started to protest, then realized he feared that I would be easily killed in my weakened state. With a nod of my head, I let him lift me onto another horse. His hands lingered on my waist as he gazed up at me intently.

“I shall be fine,” I promised.

Ignatius’ horse drew near mine. Magda gazed at me sorrowfully as she rocked the boy in her arms.

Vlad leapt onto the last horse and expertly drew it about. The horse was sleek and black, its dark eyes flashing. Despite my hatred of him, I had to admit he cut a dashing figure on his mount.

“Ignatius, lead. Glynis follow. I shall be last. Go straight to Astir’s haven and do not detour. They will be watching the skies, not looking for us on horseback.”

Ignatius nodded, spurring his horse. Instantly, he was off. I followed on my own mount, my reins clutched in my hands. The thundering of horses hooves

filled my ears, then slowly faded as Vlad cloaked us in his power and muted any sound we might make. We rode swiftly through the cobblestone streets under the canopies of the great trees and past the silent homes and businesses of Buda.

I could not take my eyes from Ignatius' form as we rode. I loved him so, yet I could not touch him or speak to him. The danger we faced was terrifying and I wished to touch him to console myself. But Vlad's anger was a living force at my back, and I knew he suspected us.

The horses wound their way through Buda, up and down lanes, darting around corners, plunging deeper into the heart of the city. The wind tore at my hair and face. I was glad, for it dried the tears I could not stop from slipping down my face.

I was at last beginning to feel a tad safe when Gregor, the dhamphir vampire hunter, materialized abruptly in the center of the street before the horse bearing Ignatius. The deadly hunter was just as pale as when he had first attacked me and was clad all in black. His pale countenance was determined as his fingers twitched over the daggers sheathed in the arm of his coat.

"I do not take kindly to those who killed my sister," he hissed.

There was a glimmer of silver, then Ignatius' horse reared back, screaming. It fell over, legs flailing as both Ignatius and Magda were thrown. Somehow, Magda managed to hold onto the boy and cushioned his fall with her body as she tumbled to the road.

I do not think the dhamphir realized there was more than one of us. He moved quite resolutely toward Ignatius with no heed to my swift approach. Gregor strode with ruthless determination toward my lover with daggers in both his white hands.

My horse leaped over the its fallen comrade toward the dhamphir.

Purely on instinct, I looped my reins in one hand. As I sailed past the hunter, I caught him about the throat and dragged him off his feet. Gregor's hand came up to grip my wrist as he struggled to free himself as the horse swept him down the street. Anger, hot and raw filled me. I remembered all too well his assault and knew he would have slain Magda and her child. Yearning for a weapon to cease his life, I did what little I could and drew the reins tighter around his throat.

"Bride of Satan," he gasped as he recognized me.

"Die, you little worm," I hissed, trying to either break his neck or strangle the life from him.

I saw the flash of his blade in his other hand. "After you, my lady."

With a cry of frustration, I flung myself from the horse to evade the blade and tumbled off the street into the bushes nearby. I remembered all too well how those daggers burned and rendered me helpless before.

The loud neighing of the horses mingled with the shouts of men as I rolled out of the bushes. Looking up, I saw that the dhamphir had cut himself free and attempting to climb to his feet. My horse was in a fury. It reared up and struck at

him with its front hooves.

As I managed to stand, I saw the horse rise up again and, at last, land a hard blow to the dhamphir. It knocked the hunter back onto the ground before whirling about and fleeing.

“Run to the haven,” Vlad’s voice ordered from behind me.

Ignatius rushed toward me and grabbed my hand. Already he carried Magda and her child across his shoulders. He drew me along behind him as we ran swiftly through the streets, leaving Vlad behind to battle alone with the dhamphir.

“Can he win?” I asked as Ignatius raced us through the narrow streets.

“I do not know,” Ignatius answered in a terse voice. “We are all weakened from lack of blood. And the dhamphir is glutted with it.”

We turned down the familiar back street and I let out a cry of relief. I had not realized how close we were to Astir’s haven. As we rushed toward the alcove set in the wall, I saw the small door open. The darkness beyond its threshold was a welcome sight to say the least.

Quite suddenly, the doorway filled with brilliant white light. The light not only filled the doorway, but also seemed to press against the sides of it, stretching it wide.

“Hurry,” Ignatius shouted.

My feet were barely touching the ground when we reached the massive doorway and leapt into the light. I was blinded by its brilliance as I tumbled to the floor. A soft carpet was there to cushion my fall. Ignatius stumbled as Magda and her child slid from his shoulders to fall down beside me.

Whirling about, Ignatius reached out his hand. A servant was already standing there holding a silver sword. As always, the haven was prepared to deliver whatever was required of it. Ignatius immediately took it and rushed back out into the street.

Vlad appeared bleeding profusely as he staggered down the street. He was covered in blood and I was certain he had beaten the dhamphir. To my horror, Gregor appeared behind Vlad. Both daggers raised, he plunged them into Vlad’s back several times. In a flash, the dhamphir was gone.

Vlad fell to his knees growling. He struggled to stand as Gregor again appeared before him. This time, the hunter held a sword.

In retrospect, I am not sure why Ignatius did what he did. Most likely it was instinct or perhaps a sense of loyalty, but if the blade had fallen, we would have been free.

Instead, Ignatius moved swiftly to defend Vlad. He was a blur of shadow darting across the street as Gregor drew back to strike Vlad down. With a swiftness I could not even see, Ignatius’ sword blocked the downward sweep of the dhamphir’s decapitating blow.

Gregor raised his pale eyes to gaze at Ignatius and he laughed in his mocking

tones.

“Well done,” he said, then attacked Ignatius in a fury of blows.

Ignatius matched the dhamphir’s frightening speed. I watched in utter terror as they fought before the open doorway. The clang of metal striking metal resounded through the night.

Vlad rose slowly to his feet and staggered toward the haven. I could see that he would have been fatally wounded if he were mortal.

Reaching the doorway, he leaned in, his eyes red coals of fire, and demanded in a low voice, “Give me a sword.”

“Oh, no, my dear friend, the battle is over now,” Astir said, finally appearing as he flowed past me in long red satin robes.

“A sword,” Vlad demanded again.

Astir reached out, plucked Vlad from the doorway, and glided backwards, drawing my Master with him.

“Release me at once,” Vlad ordered.

“Not if you plan to do anything rash,” Astir answered.

Ignatius and Gregor continued to battle beyond the doorway, their swords flashing with preternatural swiftness. Ignatius was the stronger of all of us now. But he, too, had been wounded by the blessed daggers and did not seem as swift as he should have been. A few times Gregor almost seemed to gain advantage over my love and it made me gasp in horror.

“Fall back, Ignatius,” Astir ordered in a low voice that rumbled and seemed not one voice, but many. “We must protect the haven.”

Ignatius hesitated as he managed to shove Gregor off balance, then drew back, slipping over the threshold, walking backwards toward us.

Gregor regained his balance and narrowed his pale eyes on the alcove before him. Swinging his sword back and forth before him, the dhamphir cocked his head as if to listen. His keen gaze peered into the haven. His narrow face wore an expression of slight surprise, but his eyes glittered dangerously. With a confident stride, he approached. His thin lips twisted into a feral smile.

I climbed to my feet as Magda seized hold of me. We clung together in the opulent hallway of Astir’s haven, watching the deadly dhamphir moving resolutely toward us.

If all the vampires had been at full power, I know we could have easily taken him, but we were not and he seemed gluttoned with power.

Beside me, Astir released Vlad and began to drift toward the doorway. “Stay here, Vlad, and do not violate my domain.”

Vlad growled with frustration, but he was weakened. With an angry growl, he fell to one knee. Blood poured from his wounds as he gazed at the doorway and the view beyond through matted tangles of his hair.

Ignatius looked back toward the Fallen, questioningly.

“Let him enter and know true power,” Astir answered in that ominous, choral

voice.

Ignatius bowed his head to Astir and backed up to where I stood with Magda. He flicked his gaze toward me. I wanted to flee into his arms, but I restrained myself. He did not touch me, but his presence beside me was a comfort.

Gregor sauntered up to the doorway and peered in curiously. I wondered if he could see the hallway or if it was the darkened entry I had encountered in the past. Twirling his sword in one hand, he narrowed his eyes, staring into the foyer.

“Can he see us?” I dared to ask.

“No, but he senses you are here,” Astir answered.

Gregor hesitated, then stepped over the threshold.

Quite suddenly, Astir was as tall as the ceiling and his wings of flame filled the hall. His robe was no longer scarlet, but a pure glowing white. Like a great halo his long golden hair floated and twined around his head. I could not see his face, but somehow I knew his eyes were pure white flame. With ominous intent, he lifted one hand out toward the dhamphir.

“How dare you enter!” Astir thundered in a million voices.

A look of sheer terror flowed over Gregor’s countenance as he stumbled back and fell against the now closed door. Crying out, he covered his face with one hand. The sword fell from his fingers as he collapsed to the floor.

“Kill him,” Vlad ordered.

Astir cast a sharp glance over his shoulder at Vlad with his terrible flame eyes, then floated closer to Gregor. The dhamphir sobbed, terrified, and unable to even move. Drawing his knees up tightly against his chest, the dhamphir extended one hand as if to ward off the glowing creature before him.

“We do not kill here,” Astir hissed.

“He knows of the haven now,” Vlad protested.

“No, he will not remember where it was. He has entered my domain. He is now in my power,” Astir assured Vlad.

Gregor continued to cower, sobbing in terror as the angelic creature before him hovered, glowed, and burned.

“And what is even more important is that he now knows fear,” Astir said with a satisfied smile.

Astir must have compelled Gregor to look up at him, for the hunter raised his eyes and let out a shriek so terrible that it made me flinch and look away.

Magda sobbed in my arms and pressed her face into my shoulder as her son gripped our legs in terror.

Gregor’s scream was long and terrified before it was sharply cut off. I looked up to see Astir looking at me in his quiet calm way, once more clad in his red robes, and the dhamphir gone.

“Well, that was entertaining,” Astir decided.

“Where is he? Did you kill him?” Vlad’s voice was imperious as always.

“He is sputtering and wailing as he swims his way out of the Danube,” Astir answered with a satisfied expression.

Ignatius gently touched Magda’s cheek, and then knelt to gaze at her son.

“How are you, little man?” he asked.

The little boy stared back at him. “The angel saved us.”

Ignatius smiled. “Indeed he did.”

“Oh, it was nothing,” Astir said, but looked mightily pleased with himself.

“Thank you, sir, thank you,” Magda said in a fervent voice.

“Really, it was all too much fun. I despise the hunters,” Astir responded.

“They are so...tedious.”

Ignatius ruffled the boy’s dark hair, then stood up to gaze at me. “Are you all right, Countess?”

Vlad reached out and pulled me from them. “She will be fine. Once we feed, we shall both be fine.”

Astir swept some imaginary dust from his arm. “Oh, yes. Of course. And we must let this dear lady and her son retire to their new chambers. Far too much excitement for a little one. Yes, yes, let him forget all that has happened. There. That is better.”

Glynis looked toward Magda’s son to see he was giggling and snuggling into her skirts. The look of shock was gone from his gaze.

“Thank you,” Magda whispered as she was escorted away by Astir’s butler.

“Madam, please do not leave without saying good-bye.”

“Of course I will come see you,” I promised.

Vlad’s fingers tightened on my arm. I could feel the coldness of his gaze upon me.

“Now to feed my hungry vampires. You all look simply awful and bedraggled,” Astir sniffed. He motioned us through one of his many curtained doorways. “Please, go feed, then we shall make sure you have some nice new clothes to wear. You look simply terrible.” With a wave of his hand, he vanished through another doorway.

Ignatius pressed open the curtained doorway to reveal a small room filled with pillows and cushions of all shapes and colors. Lying among them were a collection of beautiful young men and woman, barely clothed, lounging about sipping wine and eating fresh fruit. All their eyes turned upon us as the curtain was drawn back and their eyes burned with the fever of anticipation.

Vlad did not even hesitate. He swept into the room, knelt down, seized a young man, and bit into his throat. The man’s eyes fluttered with pleasure as he gripped Vlad’s strong arms with his pink hands.

I stood in the doorway in shock. To see such a bounty of willing victims was startling.

“Feed, Glynis,” Ignatius whispered, and gently nudging me forward.

Then, he, too, swept into the room and went down upon his knees among the

willing victims. Two women reached out to him, their hands gliding over his arms and chest. I felt anger at the sight, but then my hunger began to speak. I looked away just as he bit into the throat of one of the young women.

Hesitantly, I stepped deeper into the candlelit room and the smell of rich blood filled my senses. Vlad let go of the young man. His victim fell back in a swoon as Vlad seized the nearest woman. His fangs flashed in the dim light, then she cried out as his sharp teeth pierced her neck.

Turning away, I walked among the humans lounging on the floor, my dirty, burnt skirt brushing against their naked skin. They reached out to me with eager hands, beckoning to me in soft voices. I knew not what I was looking for but I looked down at all the upturned faces searchingly.

A fine, tall, well-muscled African lay toward the back of the room. He was handsome with his black skin and clean-shaven head. His dark eyes looked up at me, keen and eager. Two women lay with him, twined about him like vines.

Silently, he reached out to me and I went to him. He tilted back his head and I bit deeply. When his blood filled me, I knew then I had been seeking out a warrior, a man of strength, and I fed from him until he could give no more.

His women tried to hold me to them, but I slipped free of them and stood up. My men, my vampire lovers, were moving from one throat to the next, taking small, but healing drinks. I felt angry at the two vampires as they moved over their victims, taking so eagerly what was needed. I had nearly drained my victim. He now lay sleeping, weakened from my feeding.

I swept past both of them into the foyer.

“We do not kill here,” Astir said as the curtain fell back behind me.

“I did not kill him,” I answered.

“You nearly did,” Astir pointed out.

I licked my lips as tears sprung in my eyes, then shook my head. “I did not though.”

“He will not die. I will see to that, but you must be careful, Glynis. Your anger may spur you to dangerous decisions,” Astir advised.

“Where is my chamber?”

Astir frowned at me. “You truly are a stubborn woman.”

“Yes, I truly am.” I covered my breasts with my cloak and gave him my most imperious look. “I want to change, please.”

“Very well.” Astir waved a hand. “Go to your chamber. But remember what I have warned.”

“Your words sting my soul, sir. I cannot forget them,” I said.

Astir laughed, shaking his head. “Oh, I so do like you.”

I stomped my foot, turning away. I found myself gazing at a beautiful blue gown resting on an opulent bed. I twirled about again to find Astir and the hallway gone. Once more, he had transported me into one of the haven’s many chambers.

Moving to the bed, I looked down at the gown and saw that in its folds was my journal...this journal in which I now write.

Astir, it seems, wields power beyond even his haven to produce that which his patrons most desire.

So now I write. I write of tonight's events as I wait for Vlad to return from his gluttony. I feel strangely angry at Ignatius. Perhaps because I have never seen him feed off of such beautiful young women, I have never had the opportunity to be jealous. I do not know what shall happen next, but I feel a great sense of foreboding.

The world as I have known it has once more ceased to exist.

Chapter 34

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

2nd of May, 1820

I now know that all Astir prophesied is true. All that he warned me of has come to pass. My soul feels numbed by all that has happened, but at last I see the painful truth.

My last night in Buda was spent in Astir's haven. After I had changed into the beautiful blue gown he provided, I sat down and wrote all that I had experienced. It was a welcome relief to relate all I had endured and find some measure of understanding of my own emotions. I must admit I was quite thrown emotionally to be in the presence of both my Master and my lover.

Just as I finished writing, large traveling trunks were brought into the room, filled with my possessions. I started to question the footmen how my things had survived the fire, but then understood I must accept that Astir is more powerful than I realized. Once the men departed I hid my journal deep in one trunk and moved to stand by the fire.

I felt disconcerted by all that had occurred and knew that Vlad's suspicion was a dangerous thing indeed. But I knew not how to assuage it. If anything, if I tried to calm his fears, he would only become more distrustful.

"May we enter?" Astir's voice asked from behind me.

I turned to see Astir standing in the doorway with Ignatius behind him. A smile touched my lips as I saw that Ignatius was recovered from his earlier wounds and dressed in a long red coat. He returned my smile with his own, but it was hesitant and bittersweet.

"Yes, of course. I was waiting for Vlad to return."

"He is temporarily delayed," Astir assured me.

"By you?" I tilted my head, arching an eyebrow.

Astir just smiled innocently. "I shall leave you two alone for a few moments." He retreated back through the door as Ignatius stepped past him.

Astir graced me with a tight little warning smile over Ignatius' shoulder, then disappeared as the door shut.

Ignatius came to me silently. I wrapped my arms around his neck and held him. I stroked his silky raven hair and pressed kisses to his cheek. Wordlessly, he kissed my face and my lips, then held my cheek firmly against his. We were both warm with the life we had stolen from our willing victims. I could feel his heart beating in his chest.

We kissed again, quite sweetly and he rested his forehead against mine. I stroked his neck with my fingers, trying so very hard not to cry.

"I should have let the dhamphir kill him," he whispered at last.

"Do not worry over that now," I answered.

"But he will now take you from the city and I know not when I will see you again," Ignatius answered in quiet misery.

"I will find my way to you," I promised ardently. "I will. I promise."

He kissed me tenderly. "I love you."

"And I love you."

"Come, Ignatius," Astir's voice said from behind him.

I gazed into the dark blue depths of Ignatius eyes as Astir's hand drew him from me. In his eyes, I saw his great love for me. The two men vanished before my eyes just before the door opened and Vlad entered.

My Master was at full strength, his brutal power emanating from him like hot flames. He glared at me as he strode toward me, clad in black, his long hair flowing around his face in thick curls. He grabbed me by my throat and gazed deeply into my eyes. I glared back at him, fierce and bold, and he abruptly smiled before releasing me.

"I am a fool to think anyone could conquer you," he said with a laugh.

"Yet you try," I answered glibly.

Vlad shrugged, moving toward the fireplace. "We leave before dawn. Astir has provided us with a carriage."

"He also saved my possessions from the fire," I said pointing to the trunks.

Vlad glanced toward the luggage. "He is a creature of great power."

"Do you fear him?"

"No," Vlad answered. "Why should I?"

"You are very much the dragon, are you not?"

"Yes, I am. I am brutal, strong, and protective of what is mine. For a moment, I thought perhaps my brother had somehow managed to steal your heart."

"Really? I barely met him just tonight."

Vlad looked at me piercingly. "You lie."

I shrugged.

"But I realized, looking into those cold beautiful eyes of yours, no one can truly conquer you. That knowledge makes you so very desirable."

I waved my hand at him, dismissing his words.

He came to my side in a flash and gripped me firmly by my hair, wrenching my head to one side. He looked deeply into my eyes and said, "Never again will another man touch what is mine. Understood?"

"I know not what you speak of," I lied.

He just gave me his most fierce, feral smile. "Yes, you do. I shall kill any man, brother or no, that touches you." He released me and walked to the trunks. My traveling cloak lay on one. He picked it up and tossed it to me. "We leave now."

Catching the cloak, I held it against me. "Where are we going?"

"I told Ignatius we are going to Vienna," Vlad answered.

"But we are not."

Vlad merely smiled his cold, cunning smile in response.

We departed Buda in the crisp, gray dawn and left behind the world I had grown to love. Magda sobbed as I kissed her cheek and clung to my hand until Vlad had pulled me away. Astir and Ignatius had also come to see us off. Their good-byes were muted under the fierce gaze of Vlad Dracula.

I am now certain that Vlad suspected all of us of duplicity and wanted nothing more than to have me far from those he considered my co-conspirators.

"It was a pleasure meeting you, Countess Dracula. May we meet again," Ignatius had said, kissing my hand.

It had taken all my willpower not to break down and fling myself into his arms. His gaze had caught mine for a mere second and I felt the connection of our love flare. I had quickly averted my eyes lest Vlad see.

Later, as I sat in the rocking carriage, remembering my last moments with Ignatius, I felt a tear on my cheek. I brushed it away with my gloved hand and tried hard not to express the deep despair welling up within me.

Vlad's hand took my other hand and he held it against his thigh. He said nothing, but his firm grip on my hand was possessive.

As we left Buda behind us, I laid my head against the closed panel covering the window.

All that I had cherished in Buda was gone and I was still Vlad's.

I dreamed of Cneajna on our journey. I dreamt she was nothing more than a skeleton with gray skin, parched and dry, drawn tightly over her bones. In my dream, I tried to console her as she wept in the anguish of the hunger. And in my dream, her milky eyes looked up at me as she seized me and sank her teeth into my throat.

We reached Bistrița on a misty, dreary night. Drizzling rain fell steadily from the dark sky as our carriage found its way through the dark streets.

When we alighted from the carriage, I felt a pang of sadness as I stared up at

the countenance of the Golden Krone Hotel. I had first met Ignatius here not so long ago when my adventure had first begun and now it was almost at its sad end.

Vlad ushered me into the hotel as the proprietor gushed over us, quite anxious to make sure we were perfectly content with the room he had selected for us. I was hungry and weary from our travels and in no mood to deal with the mortal. He simply chattered on in his nervous tone. When we reached our room, I turned to Vlad and gave him my most plaintive look.

“Thank you for your kindness, but it is best if you leave now,” Vlad told the man.

The proprietor glanced toward me, saw my grim look, and immediately withdrew from the room, nearly tripping over his feet.

“You are in quite a mood, my dear wife.”

“I am quite exhausted,” I answered. “And hungry. Give me your neck.”

Vlad laughed. “I think not. I shall bring a victim for both of us.”

I sat down on the edge of the bed and pouted.

“I shall leave immediately. I can see that you shall not be satisfied until you have fed.”

I just glared at him.

Vlad leaned over and kissed my pout. “I shall return.”

I waved a hand at him and flopped back on the bed. I stared at the ceiling and sighed. My fingers played with the buttons of my traveling coat, but I had no desire to undress and put on one of my long robes. Completely morose, I merely lay there and remembered the touch of Ignatius' lips upon my own.

By then I had realized we were returning to the place of my captivity. Up until then I had been uncertain of our destination. When we reached Bistrița, I understood we were returning to the castle.

I could make sense now of the terrible gnawing within me. As we drew closer to the castle, I could feel the hunger and madness of the three women that we had left behind. My anxiety formed a tight knot in my stomach.

Closing my eyes, I drifted off to sleep for a mere moment, but in that moment, I had the most vivid and terrifying dream.

Cneajna rose up next to the bed, her body restored and once again the Hungarian beauty she had been for four hundred years. Lying down beside me, she wrapped her arm about my waist and laid a gentle kiss upon my lips.

“My little one returns to me.”

“Cneajna,” I whispered.

She smiled gently, tears on her cheeks. “My darling daughter, please come back to me. I miss you so.”

“Cneajna, I am sorry I was away for so long,” I answered.

She lay down, curling herself around my body, kissing my cheek softly.

“I need you to make me feel alive once more. Come home to me, my lost

daughter. Come home.”

“I am coming home. I promise.”

I kissed her cold cheek and hugged her tightly. I felt a great love for her in that moment, my cold vampire mother who had helped bring me into this world of eternal darkness. How could I have forgotten her when I was in Buda? What betrayal was this that my heart could forget her calm presence in my life?

Then in my dream, she drew back and I was horrified to see her drawn, skeletal countenance. Before I could escape, her fangs tore into my throat.

I awoke with a start and sat up, my bonnet falling off my head onto the floor.

Vlad stepped out of the shadows dwelling in the corner of the room with a young woman in his arms. Her long blond hair fell over his arms to brush against his legs as he walked. She appeared to be in a deep swoon. When he set her on her feet, she blinked dreamily at me. The languid expression on her face spoke of her thrall, and, as I rose, she held out her hands to me.

“This is Katya,” Vlad said. “The proprietor’s daughter.”

I gave him a dark look. “Do you wish for him to turn against us?”

Vlad laughed. “Drink what you need. No more.”

He released the girl into my arms, and I caught her easily.

“His kisses make me feel so drowsy,” she said. “I must be dreaming.”

My arm about her waist, I let her fall across the bed. She laughed drunkenly and lay in a seductive little pile on the covers.

I unbuttoned my coat and let it slip off my shoulders. Hungrily, I climbed onto the bed beside her and looked down into her transfixed blue eyes.

“Katya,” I said softly.

She focused upon me.

“Think of that which you desire most.”

I was not surprised when her gaze flicked to Vlad as he settled in a chair near the bed. Glancing over my shoulder, I gave Vlad a bemused smile.

“I drink from her often,” he answered.

Looking down at the girl, I willed her to look at me. She smiled and reached up her hands to touch my shoulders.

“He says you will kiss me as he does,” she said.

“I will kiss you better than he does,” I answered. I bent down and bit into her throat as she held me. I willed her to feel only pleasure in the bite, not pain, and she sighed happily.

I drank to quench my thirst, not my deep hunger, and then rolled away from her. She let out a soft little snore as I rose to my feet.

Vlad sat calmly in his chair, rubbing his bottom lip thoughtfully.

“Your mistress,” I said with a snort. “You brought me your mistress.”

“It entertained me,” he answered with a smirk.

Flicking my hand at him, I walked into the shadows and willed myself into the next room. I slipped easily through the darkness into the room beside ours.

In this room lay a man and woman sleeping. I pushed out with my power and plunged them into a deeper slumber. Without hesitation, I climbed onto the bed and bit the man's throat. He moaned and writhed beneath me, but did not awaken. I pressed thoughts of pleasure into his mind and drank in his blood with relish.

I felt Vlad join me, sinking his fangs into the woman. I felt no compunction to cease in my feeding. These were travelers that could easily disappear on their journey. Vlad and I both completely sated ourselves then slid from the bed, leaving the two cooling corpses behind us.

Since Buda, a latent anger had been within me and I felt it beginning to boil. It is terrible to realize I took it out upon those poor travelers, but I must admit I killed them out of spite.

As I slipped through the shadows back into my room, I felt Vlad follow me. He tried to reach for me, but I evaded him.

"Why do you not entertain your mistress?" I snarled at him.

"Jealous, wife?" Vlad said with bemusement.

I struggled to contain myself, but a cold anger filled me. "I demand to know if we are returning to the castle."

"We are."

I was startled at how easily he responded. "Oh. Well. Then. What do you plan to do about the sisters?"

Vlad crossed his arms over his chest and looked at me thoughtfully. "I suppose I shall feed them so they may return to their senses."

"So you will not kill them?"

Vlad shook his head. "No, I will not."

I relaxed a bit as he said this and realized I had been terrified we were returning to the castle only for him to wipe out my sisters and destroy what little happiness I had within the castle walls.

"Very well," I said. "Then I am satisfied."

He shook his head, laughing softly. "I am glad for that."

I began to uncoil my hair, letting it fall around my shoulders in red waves. He stared at me openly as I did, so I turned my back on him. I pointedly ignored the sleeping woman on our bed as I went about preparing to sleep through the day. It was near morning.

"I will see to the people next door," Vlad said. He hoisted the sleeping woman up into his arms and vanished from our room.

I drew on a nightgown and brushed out my hair, enjoying the sensation of warmth within my body as the blood renewed me. As I drew the brush through my red tresses, I thought of Buda, our house there and all that had occurred. It had been glorious. I wanted nothing more than to go back and reclaim my life there. But, alas, we were returning to the castle.

Vlad returned and joined me on the bed. The shutters were drawn tightly over

the windows, and I knew that the guards Astir had provided would watch our room throughout the day.

I finished brushing my hair and lay the brush on the small table next to the bed. Drawing my feet up from the floor, I lay down.

“You are unhappy,” Vlad said in a low voice.

“I dread what we will find at the castle,” I answered.

“We shall only be there for a short time,” Vlad assured me.

“I meant the sisters.”

“Oh, yes. Well...we shall deal with them,” Vlad answered, hooked his arm around my waist, and pulled me firmly to him.

“But you will not kill them,” I said.

“No, I will not.”

I sighed with relief and closed my eyes.

We returned to the castle the next night. The sky was clear and beautiful. The cold stars glittered above us set in the soft velvet of the night sky.

Vlad looked more like the Prince of Wallachia than he had since we had departed. His hair had fully grown out and his mustache was quite thick. Dressed in clothes more suited for the countryside, I could see the old world warrior within him. He was in a pensive mood, quiet, and guarded. His green eyes glimmered with dark fires, so I dared not try to engage him in conversation.

I was dressed in my traveling clothes and felt nervous about returning to the castle. My life in Buda had made my life in the castle feel remote and surreal. My nights of dressing in flowing, skimpy gowns, my limbs laden with heavy jewelry seemed a distant dream. I wondered briefly if Vlad would demand that I once more dress as a part of his harem, but I suspected we had moved far beyond those roles.

We ascended Bârgău Pass and I began to feel the pull of the sisters. I could feel their waning power reaching through the blood that connected us, crying out to me. Their hunger was so very strong and I looked to Vlad to see if he also felt it.

His profile seemed carved of stone as he sat in rigid silence beside me. If he heard them, if he felt them, he did not reveal it. Yet I am certain he must have felt their waves of hungry madness seeping through the night.

Far too soon, the castle loomed before us. I could see the flickering light of bonfires around the castle. I felt a sense of dread and glanced toward Vlad for reassurance.

“It is May first, wife. Walpurgis Night. When the devil walks the night,” Vlad said with a sardonic smile.

I let out a bitter laugh. “Dracula returns home on Walpurgis Night. How appropriate.”

“Perhaps,” he answered wryly. “Many would say I am the devil.”

As the carriage rattled up the pass to the great, broken castle, the bonfires became clearly visible, their flames twisting and leaping high into the air. The gypsies were dancing wildly to music around the fires and I could smell, even from a distance, that most were quite drunk. As the great dark carriage with its black horses clattered into the courtyard, the ribald music ceased and the gypsies rushed out toward us. I was not sure of their intentions, but Astir's guards moved to protect the carriage. Vlad emerged quickly and the gypsies fell to their knees before him in shock and relief. I followed and saw Ilona cross herself as I stood beside Vlad.

The guards from the haven, imposing in their black uniforms, drew back their horses as Vlad moved through the crowd of gypsies, touching them one by one on the forehead. It was a strange, almost surreal moment, as the bonfires threw up fiery sparks into the night around us.

"You have returned," Ilona sobbed when he touched her cheek. She kissed his hand eagerly.

Looking beyond the shadows and firelight that twisted and intertwined in an exotic dance, I saw the door to the castle was open. Slowly, I moved past the kneeling gypsies and drew my cloak firmly about me. Walking slowly, I moved toward the great black mouth that opened into my former home.

I felt tears, hot and fierce, sting my eyes as I saw at last my three sisters. They were in the doorway, hiding away from the flames, their long fingers gripping the edges of the door frame. Skeletal, frail, gray, and old, they huddled together. Ariana lay against the door frame, her head tilted so that she could see the blood filled gypsies that were beyond her reach. The women were tattered, shriveled crones. The horror of their condition enveloped me.

Ariana saw me and hissed, her hand trying to reach out toward me, but stopped by the ward of power Vlad had about the castle. Shrieking, she fell back, her body twisting in terrible spasms of pain.

Cneajna, her hair now white and brittle, bared her long teeth at me. I saw that her flesh had cracked along her cheeks.

I wept at the sight of my sisters and covered my face with my hands. I felt Vlad's hand on my back and I turned to him. He kissed my brow, then whispered words I did not understand through my despair.

The Brides cowered at the sound of his voice and began to weep. They clung to one another, a twisted heap of bones and dried flesh, their tattered dresses lying limply over their desiccated forms. I cried out to Vlad to help them and he slid past me toward the doorway. Lingered just beyond their reach, he said their names one by one and they cried out as if it pained them.

"Bring him," Vlad ordered a guard near him.

Confused, I turned to see the guards move back to the carriage. They pulled off a large trunk and opened it. Gruffly, they yanked out a man in clothes that were mere rags. He reeked of fear and piss. Vlad must have had him asleep until

this point for I had not even been aware of him. Dragging the man between them, the guards approached the castle.

“I do not suffer fools who dare try to steal from me,” Vlad told the man.

The man looked at him in terror then at the hag-like women in the doorway. He tried to scream through his gag.

“He attempted to steal one of our bags off the carriage. The guards caught him,” Vlad explained to me.

I knew what was to come and looked at Vlad with distaste. But then again, who was I to dictate any sort of decorum when I had killed so easily the night before?

Vlad took hold of the man by his arm. “This is your justice,” he snarled, tossing the man into the arms of the women.

Their savagery was beyond anything I could have imagined. They did not only take his blood, but his flesh. Huge gouts of blood sprang from their terrible bites and they feasted hungrily upon him. They did not eat his flesh, but made wounds large enough to plunge their faces into his body to drink. It was horrible, yet I could not look away. Blood splattered their grotesque bodies and the ground. I watched mesmerized as the blood sank into their flesh and slithered along the cobblestones to slide up their skin into their mouths. They feasted desperately and before my eyes I saw their skin began to flush with life and their hair turn from gray to rich dark brown, golden blond, and raven black. Their milky eyes grew cold and jewel-like, vibrant with color and fire. They consumed every last bit of his blood and licked it from their faces with long, red tongues.

They were not fully restored yet, but I could see their beautiful features finally emerging from their once skeletal forms. They looked gaunt, but they had flesh upon their bones.

“Vlad, Vlad,” Cneajna called out to him, and held out her hands to him in sad desperation.

Taking hold of my hand, he moved toward the entrance way. There was not much left of the man who had attempted to rob us. He was a dry husk. I stepped over him as we entered the castle and the torches on the walls sprang to life. The Brides cooed and whispered softly to Vlad as they crawled to him, supplicating.

Vlad stood over them, cold and imperious. They pawed at his legs and kissed his hand. Their eyes gazed up at him with desperate yearning. Only Cneajna held back, her head bowed low as she knelt before him.

“Forgive us, forgive us,” the two dark haired Brides whispered.

Vlad drew his hand away from them. “Go feed. I cannot stand the sight of you.”

The two women moaned in despair at his words and sank away from him. Cneajna looked upon us, her gaze imploring.

“Vlad, forgive us if we displeased you,” she whispered, tears in her eyes.

“Go, feed! Now! I cannot stand the sight of you!” Vlad ordered in a harsh

voice. He continued to hold onto my hand, keeping me firmly at his side.

Cneajna rose to her feet, her once glorious gown now a ruin of rags. Her face was pinched and her full lips pale. She nodded slowly and took hold of the other two women. Drawing them with her, the three women glided out into the night. With one last look cast over her shoulder, Cneajna disappeared.

Alone, hand in hand, Vlad and I stood in the foyer of the decrepit castle. My gaze swept over the great hall with despair and I felt my throat tighten. The last time I had entered this castle as a visitor, my family had been alive and I had been mortal.

“We shall only be here for a short time,” Vlad assured me. “As soon as your brother has done as he promised, we shall depart for England.”

I nodded slowly. “Very well.”

Vlad released my hand. “I will have Ilona prepare a chamber for you. You will no longer be in the Brides chambers.”

“They will know then,” I answered swiftly.

Vlad nodded. “Yes, they will.”

I tried to speak, but could not find words. He gazed at me long and hard, then walked on into the depths of the castle.

I closed my eyes, feeling a terrible sense of dread fill me.

Ilona prepared the chamber I had first slept in as a mortal. I found it a cruel irony, but did not dare complain. Vlad had been far too kind to me lately and I feared a return to his violent ways. Already he looked like the warrior of old, so I felt I must tread carefully.

Ilona had some of the other women bring in the finest tapestries and bed clothes from other rooms. The best of the candlesticks and other decorations were brought in as well. Soon the room did not seem quite as bare and terrible. My trunks arrived and the women immediately began to unpack them. Ilona seemed especially careful around me, obviously afraid of my new position in the household.

As they worked, I changed into a pale blue dress and fixed my hair. Tiny red tendrils fell around my brow and ears and I felt a little more relaxed in my modern attire.

“So many fine things,” Ilona dared to say to me. “He must love you very much.”

I waved my hand at her dismissively and sat at the mirrorless vanity. With a sigh, I arranged my perfumes and powders.

Her presence pricked at me before I saw her in the doorway. Restored to her full beauty, Cneajna stood just outside my room. Her golden hair fell around her voluptuous form. A beautiful silky gossamer gown fell to her bare feet and her limbs were encircled by fine exotic jewelry.

“What is this?” she asked in a low voice.

I put a smile on my face as I rose to my feet. “Cneajna, it is so good to see you!” I went to her, my arms outstretched to embrace her.

“What is this?” she said again in a low voice. Her sapphire-colored eyes looked sharply at me.

I faltered as slowly my arms dropped to my sides. “Vlad gave me my own chamber,” I confessed in an embarrassed tone.

Cneajna stepped into the room and brushed past me. She smelled delicious and warm, and I wanted to embrace her. Her power was cold and fierce as it pushed me away from her.

“Why would he do this?” she asked. She turned to look at me, her gaze sharp.

For some strange reason, her large gold-fringe earrings, that swung back and forth as she looked around the room, distracted me.

“Why would he do this?” she shouted.

I drew back, startled at her anger. “Cneajna, I do not know. Are you not happy that we have returned?”

“He left us here to starve. Why? Tell me, Glynis? Why would he do that?”

“I do not know.”

She looked about the room, those gold earrings swinging about. “Why would he give you this room far from his other Brides?”

“He has his own agendas. You know how he is,” I answered, trying to keep my voice very calm.

She lashed out so quickly, so fiercely, I never saw her move. I felt the brutal sting of her slap across my face and I cringed in shock.

“I took you into my heart! I helped him create you! I called you daughter!”

“Cneajna, please,” I cried out. “I love you.”

She hesitated in her angry torrent of words. Tears sparkled on her cheeks as she whispered, “And I love you.”

I reached out to her and she took my hands. Her fingers felt warm in mine, but she was trembling.

“Cneajna, please. I wanted him to come and make sure you all were all right. I begged him to do so. I do not know why he would not,” I said. It was a bit of a lie and a bit of truth. Vlad’s dismissal of his Brides was very confusing to me.

She reached out and drew me to her, kissing my lips softly, as she had in my dream, and then my brow. I trembled with emotion as she did this and, she, being the taller woman, held me gently against her. Her lips were soft and warm against my brow as her long blond hair flowed over her arm to form a cloak over my body.

“I love you, Glynis, but I am not a fool,” she said in a low voice. “You are now the first in our husband’s affections. And, worst yet, in his household.”

I started to protest, but her nails raked my neck and face, slicing deep and drawing blood. It splattered across her face and mine. She drew back slowly,

moving backwards toward the door. Slowly, she licked my blood from her full red lips.

Tears streamed down my face as I recalled the story that she had told me long ago of the day she killed her husband's mistress. I remembered vividly how she told me she had stabbed the woman to death then licked her enemy's blood from her lips.

"Cneajna," I whispered.

Her blue eyes cold and her gaze fastened firmly upon me, she glided out of my bedroom. She raised a hand and the door slammed between us.

The gypsy women stood around my room, their eyes wide and not daring to breathe.

"Leave me," I ordered them.

Immediately, they rushed the door and escaped.

Weeping, I sat down at my vanity and covered my torn face with my hands. Slowly, I felt my flesh heal, but my heart was utterly broken.

I did not tell Vlad what had happened between Cneajna and I when he came to me later in the night. I was overwhelmed with grief over the episode, but I could not bear to tell him what had happened. To relate what I had experienced was too much to endure. I felt desolate in my heartbreak. He took my moodiness as a sign of my discontentment at our return to the castle and reassured me that we would depart soon.

"I know this," I answered him shortly. "But there is no solace in this horrible place." I sat in the window and gazed down over the Arges River. I was very angry and I directed my anger at him like a rapier. I did not care if he beat me. It could hurt no worse than Cneajna's nails raking across my face and heart. "Or have you forgotten all the terrors you inflicted upon me here?"

"I have not forgotten," he said as he sat in a chair nearby. He rested his hands upon his knees and gazed at me solemnly.

"How calm you are!" I laughed bitterly and wiped away a tear. "You killed me in this castle. My family and me. You tortured me. Tried to destroy me."

"I know this," he responded, his green eyes resting on me.

"Have you no regrets at all?" My voice was harsh and demanding. "Do you feel guilt? You did great evil here! You destroyed my soul and heart! Does this not burden you?"

In silence, he seemed to ponder my words, then shrugged. "I did what I felt was necessary at the time."

Shaking my head, I looked away from him. "I hate you."

"I did not know you then, Glynis. I did not understand your nature. I treated you as I have the others. I was determined to break you. Create a perfect vessel to do my will."

I mocked him with my laughter, shaking my head.

He continued: "I know that you have obeyed me only out of the fear of what I

can do to what remains of your family. Your brother was the leverage I needed to finally make you obey.” His voice grew harsh at the word obey. I felt his gaze resting heavily on me.

I wiped away more tears. The ring he had given me sparkled darkly on my finger.

“I had confidence in your fear of me. I had confidence that you understood fully what I am capable of. That I could and would destroy all you love to keep you in submission to my will.” His voice was low and thoughtful. He slightly shook his head, his long hair falling around his face. “But in retrospect...”

I dared not look at him.

“In Buda, I saw your strength and your power. I understand now that you are more of an asset than I ever dreamed. I underestimated you and that was a terrible mistake.”

“You, sir,” I said tartly, “are a bastard.”

He smirked at me. “Yes.”

“I am not just a pawn in your wicked games.” My voice was clipped as I spoke to him. “I will not be broken by you ever. Do you understand that? I am more than your Bride. I am more than that.”

“Yes, you are,” he agreed in a soft voice. He stood and approached me.

“Have you no shame for what you have done to me?” I asked him.

“No, for I created you and you are a wondrous creation.” His fingers lightly traced over my lips and chin.

His tenderness frustrated me, but yet calmed me.

I finally looked up at him to see him regarding me in a manner I was not used to. I cannot even describe his expression or his manner. I continued to cry as I looked upon him as I once more raised my hand to wipe away the tears that fell so freely.

In the midst of my weeping, he kissed me and kept kissing me until my frustration grew into terrible desire. I tangled my fingers in his hair and kissed him amorously as we clung to each other.

He whispered, “Be with me.”

It was the first time he had ever asked me to lay with him, and I blinked my eyes in confusion. He had always forced me, with little regard to my own needs or emotions. I felt fresh tears tumble from my lashes as I gazed into his green eyes. I saw need and compassion in his eyes for the first time and it touched me. In this castle of horrors, strangely, he was my only companion. Slowly, I nodded and his mouth found mine in a torrid kiss.

In all my times with Vlad, this is the one time I must admit I chose to be with him because of my own needs. Not to placate him, not to keep him from beating me, not to keep him from terrible things or to deceive him, but because I needed him.

How can you hate someone so completely, yet find solace with him?

I am not certain, but that night, I did.

Our lovemaking was passionate, yet unlike any experience I had ever had with him. For once he was tender and did not treat me as merely his instrument of pleasure. His hands caressed my face and body with gentleness I had not known until that night.

For once, I was not afraid of him and gave myself willingly, without fear or regret. His touch soothed me and, for a short time, I felt at peace with him and all we had endured.

His long sharp fangs sank slowly into my throat as he undressed me and I trembled with the pleasure of his bite. Lifting me up, he released my throat to fasten bloodied kisses on my lips. I wrapped my hands in his long tresses as he carried me to the bed where he had first bestowed me with his bite.

I gasped as he licked my breast and caressed me with his hand.

“You are mine,” he whispered against my skin.

I did not answer but helped him free himself of his clothing. Leaning over me, his hair dragged across my skin and made me whimper with delight. Once more he sank his teeth into me, this time over my nipple.

Always exquisite and full of pleasure, his bite made me writhe beneath him as I strained against his body.

“Vlad,” I moaned.

He rose and kissed my mouth softly. “You are mine. Tell me that. That you are mine.”

I sucked on his bottom lip, tasting my blood, and he pushed me down.

“Tell me,” he said. “Tell me that you are mine and I am yours.”

Slowly, drawing my tongue over his lips, I reached down and gripped his length firmly in my hand. “I am yours,” I lied.

Whatever he saw in my eyes, he relished it and kissed me deeply. Sliding one arm under my leg, he opened me and pushed inside. I remember the intensity of that moment for it is the only time I lay with him that I truly wanted him within me.

In the aftermath, he lay with his face buried in my neck, his arms around my waist. Our bodies were intertwined and I could feel my heartbeat fading as the blood that gave me life slowly lost its power.

The windows were closed, sealed shut to keep out the sunlight, and the room was thick with darkness.

His fingers combed through my long red hair as he lay next to me.

“You are Countess Dracula in all ways, Glynis,” he said finally.

“I know this,” I answered softly.

“Do you?”

“Yes,” I said, turning to gaze into his green eyes through the gloom.

He returned my gaze steadily. “I do not think you do yet.”

I had to concede this point. I could not fathom half of what he said to me or

believe it. My fingers played with his long hair idly.

“You are my wife and I will not share you with any other. You are mine,” he said in a low voice.

I sighed and tried not to think of Ignatius. I did not wish to feel I had betrayed him by submitting to Vlad. The bond I share with my Master angers me, yet that night, it comforted me.

“You are a brute,” I said at last in response.

He slid his fingers into my hair and pressed his lips to my cheek as he whispered, “I forgive you. But I will not forgive him.”

“I know not what you speak of,” I answered, sliding my hand down his chest to caress his manhood.

“You are a vixen,” he said with a laugh and the dark tone was gone from his voice. He caught my hand and drew it to his lips to kiss. “Tomorrow, I shall arrange for us to move on to Vienna. I am not satisfied here,” he said at last.

I nodded, understanding far too well my own dissatisfaction.

“Vlad,” I said softly.

“Yes?”

I hesitated, then said, “I still hate you.”

He laughed with delight. “Yes, I know.”

I sighed as he pulled me closer to him. Wrapping his arms around me, he nuzzled my cheek.

“If you know, why do you keep me as your first?”

Vlad was very quiet and very still, but at last said, “Because it is your right.”

“I do not understand.”

“You choose not to understand,” he responded irritably.

I closed my eyes with a sigh. He was most likely right, but I was too exhausted to think. “Then you should toss me away.”

“Do not be foolish,” he answered with a snort.

I smiled at him coyly as I felt his fingers tracing over my features.

“Sleep, Glynis,” Vlad said softly.

Perhaps he willed it upon me with his power or I was just that weary, but as soon as his words faded I was sound asleep.

That night, my last night in the castle, we did not sleep in the chapel with the Brides. We slept intertwined, as husband and wife, in my chambers, and I remember, as I fell asleep, I truly felt as though he were mine and I was his. It was a strangely terrifying and comforting thought simultaneously. I wondered how I could find comfort with someone I hated.

I dreamed of my mother that day. I dreamed of her sitting by the bed, whispering that she loved me, and that my time would soon come. I dreamed of her kissing my forehead and feeling her tears on my face.

“Cara mia, be strong,” she whispered. “Do not forget what he is. What he has done.”

“I will not,” I promised her in my dream.
She smiled sadly at me then faded away as dreams tend to do.
I slept on in the arms of my Master.

Chapter 35

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright - Continued

The terrible events of my last night in the castle haunt me as I sit and write this. I still feel my hands trembling as I put pen to paper. But I must tell what happened next though it breaks my heart, and my tears will not stop flowing down my cheeks.

Soon after rising, Vlad left the castle. He had a horse saddled for him and two guards on horseback waiting in the courtyard. I followed him out, uneasy with the events of the night before. I hated to see him leave and he would not tell me where he was going.

“I will return soon,” he promised.

I sighed, pouting, my fingers playing with the sash of my blue gown. “I wish to go with you.”

“My errand is none of your concern,” he answered firmly.

To my dismay, I felt more intertwined with him than ever before. As he slid an arm around me and leaned down to kiss me, I turned my face up willingly. The bond between us had strengthened. His kiss was tender, yet passionate. It held the promise of something more.

“Return soon,” I said when he released me.

“I shall.” He swung up onto the black horse, his long cloak settling around him like wings.

Then he rode off on another of his mysterious errands.

Upon reflection, I do not believe he ever would leave me alone if he had realized what would happen. Furthermore, I do not think he would have believed it would ever occur. He had a tendency to always believe staunchly in his own abilities and power. I do not think he believed someone who loved him would defy him.

The first few hours of the night, I did not see the sisters. I sought them, but could not find them. I wanted to make amends, but they eluded me. I felt their presence, but every time I entered a room I was certain they were within, they were gone. It was possible they were clouding my mind, considering they were much older than I, but I soon grew frustrated with the game and retired to my room.

As I waited for Vlad, I made sure all of our things were well-packed and ready for our journey. Vlad had assured me that we would leave the castle in the

early morning and journey by day toward Vienna. His mysterious errand was necessary, he told me, and had refused to divulge details.

I wrote a bit in my journal, then attempted to read a novel Vlad had purchased for me. It was difficult to read a romance novel and not think of Ignatius, so I finally put it away. Despite my night with Vlad, I yearned for Ignatius. The mere thought of him made me ache.

Fidgeting, I walked back and forth in my room, anxious to be gone. Feeling quite betrayed by the sisters after I had begged Vlad to return and save them, I was a bit out of sorts.

When Ariana came to my room and timidly knocked on the door, I was immediately excited.

“Ariana,” I cried out when I opened the door.

She gave me her coy smile, then hugged me and kissed my cheek. “Hello, Glynis.”

“Darling, I missed you so. I tried to find you but I could not,” I said in a rush of words.

“I am sorry for that, but we were trying to console, Cneajna. She is much better now and wishes to see you in the throne room.”

“Is she better? I would never do anything to hurt her,” I said softly.

“Oh, yes, Glynis. She is,” Ariana swore. “She was just distraught until we calmed her.”

With much relief, I hugged Ariana again. “Will you come with me?”

“Oh, no. This is private between the two of you. I dare not intrude.” She smiled at me sweetly.

I returned her smile and kissed her cheek fondly. “Very well. I shall see you later then.”

“Of course, dear sister,” she giggled, then dashed off in a flurry of white.

Nervously, I smoothed out my favorite pale blue gown and tucked up my hair. It was a relief that Cneajna would forgive me. I had been truly frightened that she would not. I rushed down the stairs to the throne room anxious to speak with her and put the past aside.

When I entered the room, I saw her seated upon Vlad’s throne. Behind it was the golden stake. I shuddered at the sight of it, thinking of that terrible opera about Vlad and the death of my father, and dismissed it from my thoughts immediately. Cneajna looked calm, but sad when I entered. She looked up at me with her great sapphire eyes, and they were full of sorrow.

“Cneajna,” I exclaimed emotionally, moving toward her.

She hurried down from the throne quickly, her arms held out to me. I rushed to her and felt her crush me against her body. We clung together, both weeping.

“I do not wish for you to be angry with me,” I whispered. “I love you so, sweet Cneajna.”

“And I you, Glynis,” she answered in her lovely voice. “Let us not quarrel.”

“Yes, please!” I kissed her cheek and held her against me.

“The time for quarreling is done.”

The blow of the dagger into my back drove me hard against her. It cracked my ribs and tore through my flesh.

“Cneajna,” I gasped in pain and fell to the floor.

She stood over me, the bloodied dagger clutched tight in one hand. Her eyes were cold, brutal, and deadly. “I will not be usurped in my own home.”

Then she was on me, her arm arcing downward as she stabbed me over and over. I cried out and tried to defend myself, but I admit, I did not try and strike her back. Despite her brutal attack on me, I could not see her as my enemy. I sobbed and pleaded with her, but the dagger struck over and over again. I felt it striking deep into my flesh. My blood splattered her as she continued to assault me. I felt my bones crack and shatter, then began to heal. Still the dagger came at me.

“I will cut out your heart and eat it,” she snarled. “He will not have it, but I will. I will have your heart.”

“Cneajna!” I screamed her name and still the blows came. The pain was quick and fierce. I tried to crawl away from her on shattered arms and legs.

I could not fight back. I could not believe she would kill me. Yet her face was twisted in hate and fury as she drove the dagger into my flesh all the way to the hilt, again and again.

Now I believe that she wanted me to suffer, to feel pain, and not die quickly. Otherwise, she would have taken a stake and pierced my heart.

Her desire to have me suffer was her undoing.

Vlad roared into the room like a great storm. His hair flying around him like a dark halo, his cloak flaring out, he rode into the room on a cold wind and descended on her like an avenging demon. He struck the dagger from her hand and gripped her slim white throat in his hand.

“How dare you touch my wife!” Vlad growled at her, his eyes fierce fires.

“I am your wife!” she screamed at him.

His long nails sank into the flesh of her throat and he ripped it open as he flung her aside. Blood bubbled from the wound as she lay close to me. Her blue eyes were fierce with her hate as she gazed at me.

“You are nothing to me now,” Vlad hissed. His eyes were completely red and his teeth were long and wolf-like.

Curled up on the floor, my blood slowly seeping back into my body, I healed myself. I shivered with pain and the loss of blood. As I watched, he moved over her, crouching down.

Cneajna reached up to him, her gaze full of desperate love. With a snarl, he slapped her hand away and bared his fangs at her.

“She is my wife. My Countess. Only she has the strength of will and power to be my equal. She is strong, clever, and smart. Glynis is all you shall never be

in this modern world. A woman of independent thought and deed. I have no fear that if the hunters struck me down, she would continue and be strong.”

I rose to my knees, his words shocking me. Shakily, I tried to stand.

Cneajna again reached toward him, imploring him, begging him. Her terrible wound was knitting itself together, healing, and she managed to gasp out, “But I would serve you willingly.”

“I want no servant. I want someone who I can rise to power with. She is my true mate. My true equal. Never have I met a woman that I could respect as I do a man.”

Tears streamed down my face as his words pierced my heart. I sobbed as I realized Vlad saw me in the light I had always desired the world to see me in. He saw me as an independent creature that was capable and strong. The truth of that tore through me with a greater strength than any dagger.

Vlad snagged Cneajna by the throat and lifted her off the ground. She dangled from his grasp, her hands gripping his wrist. He looked toward me, his expression fierce. I stood, unsteady, my dress tattered and covered in my own blood.

“Glynis, I will kill her then we shall leave. I will never allow another to harm you again,” he swore.

Screams of terror and anger filled the room as Elina and Ariana dropped from the ceiling onto Vlad’s back. They unleashed a fury of blows so fierce it drove him to his knees. Cneajna fell from his grasp onto the floor.

With a roar, he rose into the air and flung the women away from him. Again, he descended on Cneajna, his long nails ripping across her throat.

“Vlad, no,” I wailed. I could not bear for him to kill her. I just wanted us to leave and be free of this madness.

The dark sisters launched themselves at him and he deflected Elina with one arm. She hurtled across the room and crashed into a column with a sickening crack. Ariana managed to land on his back and stabbed him brutally with her dagger. Grabbing her hair, he threw her away from him. She struck the wall, then scrambled up into the rafters above.

Gripping Cneajna by the throat, he hoisted her off the ground. “I shall tear your head from your body then I shall do the same with your sisters,” he snarled. His razor sharp nails bit into her skin.

“Vlad, no!”

“Glynis, stay back,” he ordered, and began to literally rip Cneajna’s head from her body.

Elina and Ariana leaped onto him from above. They hissed and screamed as they tore at him with their nails and teeth. He gave their assault no heed as he continued to squeeze his hand shut and his nails sliced deep. Cneajna screamed in pain. Her blood splashed over Vlad, the women and me.

“Release her,” I screamed at him, but he paid me no heed. “Stop!” I sobbed,

begging him, but he was unrelenting. My tears poured down my face as I wailed in despair. Despite her betrayal, Cneajna is in my heart and I love her. She is my vampire mother and her pain ripped through me.

I rushed at Vlad and grabbed his arm. Hissing at me, he backhanded me so hard I felt my jaw crack. I fell at his feet, stunned.

The sisters were tossed away again. They both scrambled to their feet and rushed back to attack.

“Do not defy me,” Vlad snarled at me. “I do this for you.”

His words struck deep. I realized this was his true belief. All his violence was completely rational to him. He had even alluded to me that I should be grateful that he slaughtered my family and released me from my mortal bonds to rise up to be his Bride. This was what he was to me: torment.

It was then I made my bitter choice. Healed now from my wounds, I scrambled to my feet and dashed across the room to snatch up the golden stake from behind his throne. Whirling about, I could see his face covered in blood as he snarled up at Cneajna. In a few seconds, she would be truly dead. The sisters continued to assail him, but their attempts were futile. Just as he killed my mortal family he would destroy my vampire family. He would destroy Ignatius as well. He was death in my life. Death to all I loved.

Tears in my eyes, I pulled my power up around me and my feet left the ground. Gliding swiftly toward him, I aimed the great stake at his back. Elina and Ariana saw me and shrieked. They both flew upwards to cling to the ceiling.

Cneajna gasped a single, “No” as she saw me lower the stake as I aimed for Vlad’s back.

“For my family,” I hissed as Vlad looked over his shoulder.

His expression was one of utter shock as I drove the stake up through his back, through his torso, to explode out of his chest just left of his heart. As I impaled him, he released Cneajna and she fell in a bloody heap onto the floor.

My feet hit the floor. I steadied myself as I lifted the great stake upwards, lifting Vlad up off the ground. His arms flailed as he struggled to escape. His blood showered down upon me as I elevated him above my head.

I was weeping, but I knew I must finish what I had started.

“Burn the blood,” I ordered the Brides. “Burn it now!”

Vlad twisted on the stake, roaring with pain and anger as he attempted to free himself. Then gravity gripped him and drew him down the long length of the stake. His blood cascaded down upon me and I slipped. I fell back onto the floor, nearly losing my grip on the great stake. As fate would have it, he slid down the golden stake and came to rest in my arms, fully impaled, his blood flowing over me.

I sobbed as I held him. I could feel his blood and power drain from him. The stake must have pressed hard against his heart, weakening him, for he hardly moved in my arms. His green eyes, slowly dulling, looked toward me as he

whispered, "I should have known it would be you."

I pressed my lips together and laid my forehead against his.

Around me, fire sprang up as the sister's grabbed torches from the walls and began to burn his blood. Destroying his blood would destroy his power. In a matter of minutes, we would all be free of him.

His body went limp in my arms as the blood continued to flow. His hair slowly began to have threads of silver running through it as his strong body began to wither.

Vlad gazed at me with an eerie calm. His hand struggled to rise and touch my face. When his cold, slowly shriveling fingers touched my cheek, I rested my face against them.

"I will my power to you," he whispered. "I know you will go forth and be strong, my Countess Dracula."

I shuddered at his words as his power began to flow into me. Trembling, I wept as I was filled with his strength and power.

"My countess," he whispered again. His voice faded as his hair continued to turn silver and dark gray. His features slowly became sunken and old before my eyes.

I gently kissed his forehead.

The fire hissed and spat around us, but I felt his blood as it flowed into my body, piercing my flesh like a thousand hot needles and snaking up over my skin to fill my mouth. His power filled me completely. I felt as if I would burst open with it.

Then...

I felt our bond growing faint as he grew weaker.

At last, his eyes began to close.

"Glynis," he said in a mere gasp.

"Yes, Vlad." I answered, my voice thick with emotion.

"I love you," he managed, then his eyes grew milky white and staring.

I buried my face in his hair and wept. "I know, Vlad. I know."

I held him until he was a mere husk, still living, but in a deep sleep far from the world of the undead and living.

When I finally raised my head, the sisters stood over me, torches in their hands. Cneajna, her neck a terrible wound, stepped toward me. Her expression was anguished, but determined.

"We should take his head and finish it," I finally said.

"No," she answered. "I will take him to the chapel and put him in his coffin."

I stroked Vlad's white hair with my hand, and whispered, "He is dangerous, Cneajna. He will destroy all of us if he ever rises again."

She laughed. "No, he will kill us. He will not kill you. The one he truly loved."

Looking down into the face of my Master, now shriveled and old, I knew

what she said was true. Perhaps I had known in my heart he loved me, but could not accept it because I hated him so very much. Lord, help me, but even holding him in that ballroom, I hated him. But, Lord help me even more, I felt a deep connection to him. I knew then that the one Astir had spoken of truly knowing me was Vlad, not Ignatius. And the one I loved, but destroyed, was Cneajna.

Smoothing Vlad's hair back from his face, I felt the bittersweetness of my victory over him. Perhaps I do love Vlad in some odd, terrible way. I am not certain. But, in that moment, I wanted to sit with him one last time and talk to him. I wanted to truly understand him and why he had chosen me to be his Countess. But the time for that had now passed, and he was vanquished.

Cneajna slowly bent down and took him from me, avoiding the long, sharp end of the golden stake that stood out in ghastly fashion from his chest. Holding him as she would a child, she looked down at me coldly.

"Leave. And do not come back," she said at last.

I rose easily to my feet. Vlad's power pulsed within me. I knew if I desired, I could enslave all three of the Brides to me, but I was done with this place.

"Very well," I responded.

Ilna and her women answered my silent summons immediately. By the expression in their eyes, I could see they understood that I was now the Master. They watched with wide, terrified eyes as Cneajna carried what remained of Vlad from the room. After she departed, they turned to look at me anxiously.

"Prepare my trunks for travel. I leave within the hour," I informed them.

Elina and Ariana gazed at me in awe and terror.

Unsure, Ariana stepped toward me. "I will love you as I did him."

I motioned them away from me. I could not endure to look upon them or hear their voices. I was done with the castle and done with them. They bowed their heads and slowly backed away, then vanished from my sight.

Moving through my castle, I returned to my bedchambers and changed into my traveling clothes. The gypsy women hurriedly prepared my things as one rushed down to tell the men to prepare the carriage. Soon, all the gypsies would know I was their new Master.

Soon dressed, I stood near my vanity staring at the ring on my finger. I began to draw it from my hand, then hesitated.

"You are free," I heard my mother whisper.

Yes, I was free. I lifted my chin and steadied my nerves. The end had come for me at last.

Leaving the ring on my finger, I walked through the dark hallways of the decrepit castle to the crypt that lay beneath the inscription:

DRACULA.

I found Cneajna carefully arranging Vlad in his coffin. She had taken the time to find his royal robes and dress him. His hands were folded over his chest

and she had wrapped his wine-red royal cloak about him. The royal crest of the family Dracul was set over his head. She looked up at me coldly as I entered. I noted the stake had been drawn out of his body.

“If you feed him, he will rise,” I said coolly.

“I will not,” she answered me. “I will be his faithful wife and care for him in death.”

“This is not death,” I said. “This is limbo.”

She shrugged. “Then so be it.”

“May I have a moment?” I asked.

Cneajna regarded me, then nodded. She slipped out of the crypt leaving me alone.

Standing over his coffin, I tried to see the strong, cruel man with whom I had lived all of my vampiric existence. I could not truly find any trace of him in the shriveled form in the coffin. Slowly, I leaned over and touched his hand that wore the ring that matched my own.

“Farewell, Vlad,” I whispered. “I have my revenge now. My family is avenged and you are no longer my Master. I know now you love me. I cannot say I love you, but I can say that you have liberated me in ways I never imagined. You have made me strong and I thank you for that. I know you truly understood my soul and I will forever be bound to you because of that.” I hesitated, searching for words. “Another has my heart, Vlad. But you have my soul.”

Leaning down, I kissed his parched lips and drew back. A tear that had fallen from my face was sliding down his cheek. Or, perhaps it was his tear. I cannot say.

I turned and swept out of the crypt.

I did not look back to see the name DRACULA written over its entrance or to see the pale woman standing so faithfully by its entrance. I knew she would not dare come against me now. I was her Master now and she knew it.

I walked through the crumbling castle to the courtyard and to the waiting carriage.

Ilona stood near it, ordering a large trunk to be loaded up onto it. I looked at her curiously, and she hesitated before saying, “It is the bodies of your family.”

Solemnly, I reached out and touched the trunk.

“Then we leave together,” I said.

She nodded, bowed to me, then scurried away.

As I was helped into the carriage, I hesitated and looked upwards. Above me, two pale faces darted back from a darkened window. With a rueful smile, I let myself be lifted into the carriage and settled back into the seat.

The door shut firmly and I found myself alone in the carriage. For a moment, a mere moment, I felt the ghosts of my family with me. I lowered my head and whispered a prayer for their souls.

As the carriage rolled out of the courtyard to begin its journey to Bistrița , I could not help but look back one more time at the castle. Its countenance was a blur as once more tears seized me. I was leaving alone. I had lost all. My mortal family. My vampire family. And my Master.

As the castle vanished slowly from view, I finally released it from my gaze and settled back into my chair.

Slowly, very slowly, I began to smile as I realized that at last, I was truly, fully, free.

Epilogue

The Journal of Lady Glynis Wright

The Golden Krone Hotel, Bistrița

5th of May, 1820

Soon I depart for Buda. All is arranged. I have sent letters to Sir Stephen and the Baroness from Count Vlad Dracula explaining he has reconsidered his actions and wishes to see them at once. They are gullible enough to believe the lies I wrote in those letters. Of that I am certain. When I signed the letters with Vlad's florid "D" and sealed it with red wax and his signet, I smiled.

I know Vlad would be proud of me.

Now I sit writing in my journal. I have fed well and I feel strong. It is two days since I left the castle and I feel at peace at last. I have written letters to my brother in England and a few of my friends as well. It was a move that felt remarkably human and wonderful. I am not quite certain how I shall explain my widowhood, but I am certain I can conjure just as fascinating a story as Vlad did about my "accident."

I did attempt to visit Erzsébet one last time, but to my dismay, I could not find the cemetery in which she rests. I suspect that Vlad's last errand before his unmaking was to secure her resting-place with magic. I was quite forlorn by this turn of events, but perhaps eventually his ward will fade so I will be able to liberate my tragic sister.

What I must relish now is that I am free of Vlad. And, surprisingly, it was Vlad who gave me the strength to liberate myself.

Strangely, I almost miss him.

Perhaps I am more a monster than I wish to admit, but in our last nights together, I understand now we had reached a greater understanding than I had realized. Vlad knew I would never love him, but had been satisfied to have a strong partner at his side. I had realized that despite my fierce hatred of the man, he had taught me to be strong and to feel confident in my own abilities. Vlad was right. We were a powerful pair. Now we shall never know how great our true potential could have been.

Astir's prediction has come true. It is a wonderful relief that it was not my beloved Ignatius who suffered. Vlad and Cneajna created me together. I suppose it was inevitable that I should have to destroy them to be free.

So what shall I do now?

I shall return to Buda and find Ignatius. I am at last free to love him fully and freely. We will be together, I swear it.

I shall also claim Vlad's estate as my own since I am his wife by his own declaration. It is only my right.

And, of course, I shall get my revenge upon those who destroyed my family. I am not quite done yet with Sir Stephen or the Baroness. Vlad gave them to me and I will have them.

Again tonight, I considered taking Vlad's ring from my finger. But as I gazed at it, I realized that I should keep it upon my hand as a reminder. Vlad Dracula was a powerful, remarkable man who did as he pleased. He taught me well. So I shall keep the ring upon my finger.

For after all, I know two things about myself.

I was born Lady Glynis Wright.

But I am now Countess Dracula.

About the Author

Rhiannon Frater works and lives in Austin, Texas. She became an Independent Author at the urging of her husband.

She loves reading, movies, gaming, and hanging out with friends and family when she's not tapping away at her computer on her latest story. She also loves hearing from her fans and tries to respond to everyone who emails her.

She is the author of the *As The World Dies* Zombie Trilogy and the modern day vampire novel, *Pretty When She Dies*.

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