

**Dinner with Dracula**  
Written by Ryan Meier

Pietro's cloak hung heavy on his thin shoulders, soaked through with the night's cold rain. The trip to the Count's castle had taken far longer than he anticipated and arriving late for his first dinner with the fabled vampire king had him shaking more violently than the frigid weather.

The darkness of night descended several hours earlier, long before Pietro crossed the thin, rocky bridge that connected the crag-like mountainside to the castle's front courtyard. He cringed, sticking to the center and staying as far away from the edges as he could. Each small step on the slick stone took him closer to his destination, but his constant worry about slipping off the edges of the bridge made him feel like he might be sick. If he weren't already so late, he would have crawled on his hands and knees across the entire length.

A massive, broad shouldered man answered the door, pulling it open with a jerk. He stood at least two feet taller than Pietro, the hulking figure covered in rough stitching around his face, neck, and hands. The castle servant groaned through a closed mouth and gestured for him to enter. The lavish castle's entryway shone with gold plated picture frames, beautifully crafted statues, elaborate tapestries, and blood red carpets from wall to wall. Each sight Pietro saw was greater than the last, forcing the large doorman to pull Pietro by the collar towards the dining room, his eyes wide with amazement.

Two more servants, strikingly similar to the first, swung open the two decorated wooden double doors and allowed the young vampire to enter the dining room. At the center of the massive space, lying seductively under a giant, shimmering diamond chandelier, sat the

largest wooden table Pietro had ever seen. The dark mahogany was lined with chair after chair, many of them filled with men dressed in immaculately tailored dark suits.

The room rang with indistinguishable chatter and laughter, a chorus of noises that only clenched his gut and fluttered his non-beating heart into his throat. The servant lumbered into the room and Pietro followed, seating him in between two vampires he didn't know. As he sat, he couldn't help but feel the other's eyes watching him, the type of attention he hated.

Hundreds of candelabras purposefully placed amongst the vast table settings suddenly flickered, nearly blowing out as a swift, cold breeze swept through the room. A wispy, black shadow swirled around, settling into the seat at the head of the table. The Count had joined his party.

The darkness materialized into an intimidating form, one that struck fear deep into the hearts of even the fiercest of the guests. The average vampire could be hundreds of years old, perhaps a thousand years old. Through all that time they maintained a majority of their human form, and despite with their extremely pale skin and blackened pupils, were able to continue moving through human society without much notice.

The same could not be said of Dracula. He was an imposing creature who had transformed over the thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of years of life and had long ago shed his humanity. His face, angular and hard, featured completely black eyes, a widened mouth full of razor-sharp teeth, and an elongated tongue similar to a snake's. When he spoke, his deep voice shook the room, able to paralyze unsuspecting listeners with fear. After all, everyone in the vampire community knew what happened when you offended the Count.

“Welcome to my home.” Dracula stood as he spoke, raising his arms out to the side. On cue, the seated guests rose with him. “It is my pleasure to host each von of you. After all, I find it very important that we maintain contact with von another. As always, we will begin with a toast.”

Dozens of replicant servants lurched in, carrying decorative platters filled with golden goblets adorned with gems and etched mystical symbols. Distribution took several minutes, but no one spoke. The vampires stood and waited.

Pietro couldn't help but feel inferior to the other vampires. He was smaller and thinner, completely underdressed in his oversized and over-worn suit. The fact that he was still damp with rain didn't help. He couldn't help but feel self-conscious, making the stares burn with even more heat. After all, he had felt this way all of his life. Even in the days and weeks after being turned, the additional strength and senses did little to improve his self-confidence. Becoming a vampire didn't make everyone a badass.

As his goblet arrived, an all too familiar worry boiled inside of his gut. Pietro knew what was in those goblets before his had arrived, but it didn't feel real until it was in hand. It was full of human blood.

“Brothers and Sisters, please join me in celebrating another year of glorious hunts, fruitful conversions, and the slow destruction of the human race. Vaise your goblets and enjoy the fresh blood. This is, after all, part of my selected stock of beautiful human youth.”

Dracula raised his goblet and drank heavily; his guests followed. Pietro did not.

The Count, after centuries of accumulating immeasurable power, held absolute awareness of his surroundings. He finished his swallowing and his eyes immediately flickered to Pietro.

“What?” Dracula asked, staring with wide eyes at Pietro. “Is there something wrong?”

The silence intensified, all vampiric eyes turning towards him.

“I – uh. No, my Count. It’s just - I don’t really care for the taste of it.”

Dracula’s eyes narrowed.

“It isn’t that I don’t – Well, I just don’t have a taste for it.” Pietro’s voice squeaked under the pressure. “There’s just something about it, I don’t know, maybe the consistency? It’s awfully thick and it always gives me feeling like I swallowed a handful of pennies.”

A booming, bottomless laugh echoed through the hall, breaking an awkward silence like shattering glass. “Where did we find this guy,” Dracula choked out, “he’s great. Oh. Oh, I needed what.” He continued laughing. His guests, especially the ones who were familiar with Pietro, stayed ghostly silent. “Go ahead,” the Count continued, “please enjoy it my vunny vriend.”

Pietro’s only movement was a shaking hand.

“I – Sire, I wasn’t joking. Is there any way. Um. Any way I might have something else?”

Dracula’s chuckling stopped. “What? Your serious?”

Pietro timidly nodded his head.

“Who. Who turned this... man?” Dracula demanded, looking around the table.

No one moved. Finally, a well-spoken vampire to the Count’s left let a name slip out of his mouth, fear leaking out with it.

“It was your cousin, My Lord. Baron Mortigan.”

Dracula turned to his distant cousin, a scowl on his face. “Is this true, cousin?”

The heavy set, out of place vampire nodded, head lowered as he refused to make eye contact. Dracula shook his head, looking as if he might lower it all the way into his palms. He drew in a deep breath and gestured for one of the servants.

“Can you please bring our guest a goblet of wine.” It was the only time in the history of the world anyone had heard the Count sound defeated. He sighed again, turning back to Pietro. “You are lucky I have a penchant for family.”

As the Count turned back to the crowd Pietro compulsively spoke up, unable to keep it in. Fear had taken over.

“My – My Lord. I mean no disrespect, but I would much prefer something slightly easier on my stomach. It’s sensitive, you know. Do - do you perhaps have cranberry juice? It helps w-“

Without letting Pietro finish his sentence, Dracula dissipated into black smoke, swirling up and around the room, extinguishing several candles. His swirling shadow sliced past the shocked audience, severing the man’s head from his body. The force of the decapitation flung the head up into the air as Pietro’s lifeless body slumped from the chair and collapsed to the ground.

The shadow swooped down, catching the head mid-air as it returned to its place at the head of the table. Dracula shifted back into his physical form and without hesitation opened his wide, toothy maw and bit a chunk out of the head. The gruesome sight stunned even the most brutal vampires at the table.

Dracula turned to Mortigan, still slowly chewing the chunks of skull and flesh. “Next time, my dear cousin, this will be your head.” The Count’s long, reptilian tongue slithered out of his mouth and circled his lips, catching the remnants of his snack. “Now, where did we leave off?”