

Feral Desires

As feral beasts prey upon the streets of London, dogged men roam society's halls in search of their own victims. Far away from the smog and humdrum of factories, royal blues and rose hues dash around the ballroom floor.

Even at his own pace, Benjamin finds these types of affairs rather tiring. His standing as the Duke forces him to feign interest, and an invitation from the Prince himself can hardly be disregarded, especially when the Prince is one's childhood friend. Still, the glitz of modern inventions can hardly distract from the stench of desperation clinging to the perfumed garments and coiffed wigs of his fellow men. Some liquor in his cup, on the other hand...

"There is something ethereal about this piece, don't you think, my lord?"

A woman claims the space to his left. A quick glance reveals a subdued countenance, cheeks flushed from the occasional sip of wine, he's sure. Her colour is neatly emphasised by the dress embracing her slight frame. Her eyes follow a similar pattern that Benjamin's did when he first noticed the painting on the wall. It is the Prince's selling point, combining a masquerade with a gallery showing, the hazard of soiling priceless artefacts part of the arousal. Still, Benjamin does not dare to step even closer, lest he might get sucked in.

"Ethereal is not necessarily how I'd describe it, my lady," he eventually retorts.

"How else?" As she turns to meet his eye, the Duke notices her fight the urge to step back. Though long accustomed to such reactions, he never fails to question whether people act this way in regard to his darker skin, or the mismatched colour of his eyes; his devil's mark.

"Vicious, more likely," he says, turning back to the painting. Outstretched amongst the canvas lies a tragedy in its purest form: a couple, ripped apart in blossoming courtship by a being of cruel disposition. If he stares long enough, Benjamin might actually notice the individual hairs move of their own volition, hear the droplets of blood pool at the lovers' feet, feel the moon reflect in his irises; one, a sweet honeyed confection, and the other a dark mass you could drown in.

If not before, Benjamin is sure the lady will flee now, but she is stopped in her attempt by familiar footsteps. Benjamin remembers the cadence of his friend, the heavy lift and the slow drag of his right heel, a limp so subtle not even Francis's closest servants notice.

"My Prince," the lady breathes, curtsying. Out of habit, Benjamin follows suit.

Behind them, Francis is beaming. With his gangly legs that manage to stretch thin the fabric of any pants he encounters and fair curls that shield the world from the icy pools he calls eyes, a friend appears. "I see you have made an acquaintance with this rascal, Lady Naylor. I hope he caused no trouble, dreaming up horrible stories about my paintings," Francis quips. He claps the Duke on the back, overenthusiastically, baring his canines. Benjamin kindly dubs this behaviour as Tory-play, though these days he is uncertain how much of it is merely pretend.

“I believe your paintings speak for themselves, my friend. Now, if you excuse me.” With these words, Benjamin hopes to find a quiet corner in this madness. Moments later, Francis emerges once more.

“Is this truly the first impression you want to leave my betrothed with?” He plops down next to the Duke on the chaise. “Apparently age does not always grant a positive change.”

Against all hope, Benjamin’s suspicions prove correct. He has been replaced by another, and her name is Lady Naylor. “You changed, as well Francis. It seems only yesterday you were playing hunt the squirrel with your cousin, Magdalen, and look at you now.” Benjamin had hoped the mention of Magdalen would get a rise out of his friend, but his face remains a steel guard. Unlike Benjamin, whose mind is reeling with images of Magdalen’s mangled body sprawled across the lawn, her innards pricked by thorns. He has to physically shake himself to cast the image astray.

“Even back then you were casting judgement on me,” Francis says, taking hold of the cup Benjamin has been absentmindedly fingering. Their hands brush, ever so slightly, making Benjamin’s mouth run dry.

“Someone had to keep your humility in check, your mother and I seem to agree in that regard.” Lady Gillingham had taken in the Duke during a particularly troublesome summer, stating that he is a son and a brother *‘to us all. Well... perhaps to most of us,’* she had finished, looking at Francis, at that time entrenched in one of his sketches. Benjamin could feel his cheeks run crimson, mulling over the meaning of her words for the remainder of the evening. A mother’s intuition is a strong asset, and outside of the confines of governesses and tutors, Francis’ and Benjamin’s tendency to disappear for unaccounted periods of time have probably not been lost on her. Neither has the infinitesimal evidence, the crumpled shirts, the unruly hair and flushed lips. At that moment, Benjamin had felt found out, and vowed to abstain from the drug that had been Francis.

Ultimately, these last years of separation were the first of which the two men have found the distance between them potentially too unbridgeable. Unfortunate events, to which count Francis’s betrothal to Lady Naylor, and his father passing, have lead them on single paths that letters can hardly replace. “Speaking of, where is that beautiful creator of yours?”

While Francis gradually slips into an account of his mother’s travels and recent ills, his eyes continue to search around the room, for Lady Naylor, he’s sure. Benjamin grits his teeth at this, his fingers at that point dug deep into the cushions to stop himself from reaching over and slapping Francis. Francis’s undivided attention used to be something self-evident, not something earned. Being forced to share this scarce resource with others, for eternity no less, pains Benjamin deeply.

The next time he finds himself in front of the painting, long after the guests depart and his only friend remains a bottle of dregs, he imagines himself as the beast, with Francis and Lady Naylor entwined, mangled like Magdalen’s little body. “Our own personal tragedy.”

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The next morning brings on a storm. Frantic screams haunt up the hallways and rip Benjamin from slumber. His clothes lay astray, tossed off in the night's sweat. As he bends over to pick up his breeches, someone rattles at the door, cursing his name. "Just a moment," Benjamin hisses, slipping into his shirt and turning the lock.

What horror faces him on the other side, no nightmare could prepare him for. A crimson visage, with pupils blown to the size of constellations. If it weren't for the iron grip digging roots into his shoulder blades, the Duke may think to be still under Morpheus' spell. "Benjamin," the name is but a whisper on Francis' lips." She's murdered. *It's found me.*"

Even before Francis can utter her name, the Duke knows his friend's betrothed is dead. The Duke's sinful desire has come true once more.

"Are *you* alright?" The question slips out faster than Benjamin can process. On instinct, the Duke's palm finds the nape of the Prince's neck, his thumb caressing the other man's skin where no blood could soil its softness. The world stills for a moment, quiets just enough to allow Francis to say: "It's happening again. It has followed me, from Bellingshem, from Oxford. Oh, Benjamin, what to *do*?"

Seeing his companion this dishevelled tugs at Benjamin's heart. Memories flicker before his mind's eye, of entrails hidden in closets, doors broken off their hinges like child's toys. How many mornings had Benjamin woken up to find Francis trembling next to him, covers drawn up to his nose, eyes fixed onto a spot in the corner, drawing the outlines of some indescribable horror that would leave both of them chilled to the core, Benjamin soaking up his friend's anxieties by osmosis.

"This can be fixed, Francis." At this, Francis stills. "A hunting party can be arranged. It will be found. But first, show me to the room, promptly."

Their touch unbroken, the Prince and the Duke stalk towards the southern wing of the estate. Service staff is practically toppling over each other to get a slice of truth to share with the rest. The entertaining morbidity of the affair becomes all the more evident when they hesitate to budge even after the presence of the Prince is noted. Even the Duke finds himself having to push through the small gathering to fall into the middle of the bloodbath. Whatever he was picturing on his short walk to the scene of the crime paled in comparison to the obscenities that reality entails.

Where the Prince's bed stands, shreds of fabric hang above, intertwined with the inner beauties Lady Naylor carried inside. A tube of flesh swings, a piece of Lady Naylor begging for a final moment of attention before flickering into the ether.

Benjamin can barely feel his face, can only imagine the skewed visage painted on it. Looking around, there are no signs of burglary, or motive, the couple seemingly chosen at random, if it

weren't for the Prince's history of horrors. Confirming Benjamin's suspicion, not even the window appears to be broken, the beast that attacked seemingly vanishing. If it were not for Lady Naylor's empty vessel plastered on the walls, and a mirror smashed to bits, there would be no proof of the attacker's existence. That, and the three gashes left on Francis's chest, another detail noted only post-haste, once Francis' hand slips from Benjamin's grip and the fellow drops to the floor.

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At night, after the Duke has convened with the Colonel to set up a hunting party to swift through the estate, he seeks sweet repose in the Prince's chambers, relocated to the opposite corner of the morning's monstrosities.

Francis is resting, eyelids fluttering gently, a placid smile plastered on his face. Benjamin finds it interesting how seeing Francis this way is somehow more unnerving than in his usual frenetic state. During their time at Oxford, and with Magdalen long buried, Benjamin had given up on studying his friend too closely. With the years he had learned that this attention to detail he had invested into their friendship was abnormal, or at the very least discouraged.

"You came to see me," Francis says.

"I'm yours, after all," Benjamin says. "Your guest."

"And friend," Francis says. Lifting himself upright, he gives up mid-way and plops back onto the cushions. Nervously, Benjamin turns around to pour the Prince a cup, biding time.

"Are you feeling any better?" Benjamin asks, stupidly.

"The beast has finally marked me as its property." Francis downs the contents of his cup and motions for another. "I am claimed."

"You always had a flair for the dramatic," Benjamin says, though his friend is right. The gash on his chest will scar, its size displaying the significance the beast has in Francis's life.

"Do you think we can be rid of it?" There is an earnest note to Francis that Benjamin only now notices the previous absence of.

"It's different now. You have more men at your disposal," he says.

"Men who don't believe me. I have heard the talk, drifting in and out of sleep. They think me a fool. Worse, that I am responsible for her death."

"Nonsense," Benjamin retorts, though he had heard the same walking past the servant's quarters. "Rest up, and you will be there to see me drive a stake through that Beast's heart once and for all." In his passion, Benjamin drops to his knees, his fingers searching for Francis's. Those beautiful, uncalloused hands, not a day's labour marking his lithe frame. "I will protect you."

"Promise?" Francis asks. His breath is warm, marked by infection. Benjamin fights the urge to turn away. Francis's lips are cracked, his chest heaving. Once Benjamin's thumb presses down, Francis's jaw falls open with ease, his tongue wet against Benjamin's digits. One moment Benjamin

vows to respect their boundaries, the rules set up in younger days to protect them from downfall, the next he's straddling his companion, painstakingly aware of how easy it is to break him.

Their bliss is short-lived, torn to shreds by a knock on the door. "My prince?" A soft voice, a female voice, from the other side. "You have sent for me?"

Benjamin's features burst like an overheated lantern. Words of apology fall on deaf ears as he smooths his breaches over and lets the girl inside. He notices her auburn curls modestly draped around her shoulders as she steps past him. It is those very same curls he finds hanging from the ceiling, caked in blood, with the Prince or his companion nowhere to be found.

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"To the woods," the Duke commands, sending out the Colonel to get his men. The humdrum of events that proceeds is enough to drown out the terror blooming like a bush of thorns at the base of his head. Benjamin had left Francis alone, despite danger being imminent. His rage overtook him, as it tends to, his temper always marked as short, a hot-headedness that proved beneficial in the bedroom but so often hindered serious affairs.

The rhythm of hooves aligned with the stutter of his heart. Greenery whizzes past his head, taking odd shapes, nature's sounds egging the Duke on. A bird's call turns into the Prince's whine, a horse's whinny into the Beast's snarl.

Close to nightfall, morale is low and some of the men break off on their own to return to the house. "We should reconvene tomorrow, my lord," the Colonel says to the Duke. Their horses gulp down water like drowned men, in need of repose. "I am anxious to see the Prince's return as much as you but we also have to consider the possibility that--"

"Do not finish that sentence if your position is worth anything to you. You were hired to protect him. You failed." The Duke was unsure whether he had meant those words for the Colonel or himself.

"My lord, you have seen the chamber. That girl has burst from within. We had to inform her parents and let me assure you, *I* will not forget her mother's eyes. At the very least we--" Benjamin failed to hear the last of the Colonel's words, his attention caught by something down the stream.

"You are right," the Duke cut the Colonel off. "Return to the house. Apologies for my outburst, Colonel. Treat the men to a feast."

Evidently confused, but welcoming the change, the Colonel retreats. Once the Colonel's horse turns the corner, and his own is fastly secured, Benjamin crosses the stream, his stubbornness warming him against the dropping temperatures of the night. Hidden behind the shrubs and fallen logs, an animal's den has been cleaned out, safe for one lumbering beast and the smell of decay. As if stepped forth from the confines of paintbrushes, the Beast reigns tall, hairs illuminated in shades of red, pale against the moon.

“There you are,” Benjamin says, inching towards it, pistol drawn. “I was worried, old friend.”

Turning around, the Beast rumbles anxiously, pale blue eyes fixed on the Duke. The eyes that have haunted them since the fated night in Bellingshem. The last thing that all of their victims have seen. The men with clawed off arms, paid off to fault dangerous automatons and factory casualties, women ripped apart that fell prey to childbirth, countless stories Benjamin concocted with time and money to protect his friend from scrutiny, lying even to him about the truth behind these events, concocting a Beast for them to fear. “It is okay, Francis,” the Duke coos, one hand gingerly stretched out, as an offering. “You are okay.”

It had first happened after one of their games. Childhood innocence turned into care and infatuation, broken up by the boarding school faculty and Francis’s parents. Dragged from the sunshine into a makeshift cell, the boys were made to repent. However, where Benjamin’s iron will sustained the desire, Francis fell prey to unquestioned obedience and shame. That night, as they were praying to God for forgiveness, Francis dropped to the floor, convulsing. With foam at his mouth, his eyes clung to Benjamin; Benjamin who did not dare leave his friend in case these were the last moments together. To his surprise and horror, his friend did not perish, he merely broke apart, his skin melting away in a sulphuric cloud that made Benjamin vomit next to his bed. As bones snapped into place, a piercing noise escaped Francis, a howl so deafening Benjamin was certain a member of faculty would burst through the door at any moment. Out of fear or incompetence, however, they were left alone.

With every year and each suppressed desire, the Beast grew, wreaking havoc where the two of them were found together. Not even indulgence helped. Each release, each glimpse of romance through a shared kiss, a longing glance, drowned Francis in waves of shame, followed by disaster. It took the death of Magdalen, catching them at an inopportune moment, to break them apart. Francis begged Benjamin to leave, and never return if he truly cares for him. So he did, though not for long.

“I’m here,” the Duke says now, head pressed against Francis’ red fur. “And they will never take you away from me. No amount of shame, or blasphemous doctrine will break us apart.”

Jealousy and neglect prevented Benjamin from coming to Francis sooner, his greed for Francis’s attention allowing death to multiply. The worst of it is, Benjamin relished in it. He had been an accomplice, his bond to Francis marked by sin. He is done pretending, it is time for Francis to do the same, he decides. “Francis, my Prince, let your desires roam free.”

And as though for the first time since the Beast appeared, where there has previously been an empty space, an understanding passes across its face. A conspiratorial glint in Francis’s eye which is met, in turn, with love.