

"THE OPEN CASKET"

Written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. BERCHTESGADEN MOUNTAINS - REDWINTER CASTLE - NIGHT

Lightning plays over dark peaks, followed by distant thunder.

Ravens circle slender turrets of a gray castle, a flickering light shines in a high, narrow window.

A dark carriage drawn by two black horses winds its way along a mountain road to the castle.

SUPER - Redwinter Castle, Austrian Empire, 1806.

INT. REDWINTER CASTLE - STUDY - CONTINUOUS

The cold stares and stern expressions of many portraits hang on the walls and over a cavernous fireplace.

Viscount ULRICH REDWINTER, 40, gaunt, pale, noble garb, Austrian, sits in a wing-back chair, swirls a glass of wine, stares into the flames.

ULRICH

My heart is lost by your passing,
the pain never subsides.

The fire is fanned by a sudden breeze.

MADLINE (O.S.)

Would you feel lifted by my touch,
that has been denied for so long?

Ulrich frowns sullenly.

ULRICH

I wished upon wishes that this
could be possible.

MADLINE (O.S.)

As have I.

ULRICH

And forgiveness?

MADLINE (O.S.)

Our love for each other, is all
that matters.

ULRICH

Then our wait is over. Tonight,
those wishes are to be granted.

EXT. REDWINTER CASTLE - COURTYARD - NIGHT

The coach rumbles into the courtyard under the gaze of twisted carved gargoyles and sullen angels.

ULRICH (V.O.)
For opportunity is soon to knock
upon our door, my love.

The COACHMAN, 50, steps down, opens the carriage door.

COACHMAN
Tis' a fierce storm coming for
sure, I'd hasten inside fore' it
comes down!

CHARLES DRAYTON, 28, handsome, steps out onto the cobbles, offers a hand to MELINDA HARTWELL, 17, doe-eyed.

A flash of lightning illuminates a gargoyles' leering face.

MELINDA
Oh my!

CHARLES
Wonderful aren't they, my dear?

MELINDA
No, Charles, they're grotesque.

Charles raps upon the door with his cane.

The door swings open with a groan, POE, 40, stooped, deformed, an oil lamp in one hand, greets them.

Melinda recoils at the misshapen man-servant.

POE
Mr. Drayton, Miss. Hartwell. I am
Poe, I've been instructed to see to
your needs during your stay at
Redwinter Castle.

Poe leads them inside as the Coachman unloads the carriage.

INT. ENTRANCE HALL - CONTINUOUS

Portraits and suits of armor grace the vast entrance hall, a sweeping grand staircase ascends to an elaborate gallery.

POE
I'll show you to your rooms.

MELINDA
(whispers)
I don't know which is more hideous,
the statues or this fellow.

POE
Viscount Redwinter has requested
your company for dinner this
evening.

CHARLES
It would be an honor.

As Melinda reaches the bottom of the stairs, she reaches out,
grips tightly to Charles' arm.

CHARLES (CONT'D)
Melinda? Are you alright?

Melinda looks to the floor, seemingly hypnotized by the first
few steps.

CHARLES (CONT'D)
Melinda!

She snaps out of it.

MELINDA
Oh, dear me, I just came over all
peculiar.

CHARLES
A nap and a stiff drink will remedy
that, darling. Lead on, Poe.

Poe leads them up the stairs.

Halfway up the stairs, Melinda looks back down to the bottom
step, fear on her face.

INT. GUEST ROOMS - MOMENTS LATER

Opulent, appointed with fine furniture, more portraits.

Poe opens the door, moves around the room, lights the lamps.

CHARLES
Very grand, don't you think,
Melinda?

MELINDA
It's dusty, and cold.

POE
I'll fetch your luggage presently.

CHARLES
Thank you.

POE
Dinner will be served at seven
sharp.

Poe leaves, closes the door behind him.

INT. CRYPT - NIGHT

Hundreds of candles circle two stone biers, one of them supports an open casket decorated with carved roses.

Ulrich looks upon the casket's contents with longing eyes.

Poe enters from an arched doorway.

POE

Is she not as comely as I told you,
Master?

ULRICH

Madeline will be most pleased.
Make the preparations for tonight.

POE

Tonight, my Lord?

ULRICH

At dinner.

POE

The wine?

ULRICH

Yes.

POE

And what of Drayton?

ULRICH

Do as you wish with him.

Poe bows, rubs his hands together, smiles with wicked glee.

POE

Master, is too generous.

INT. DINING HALL - NIGHT

A portrait hangs above a grand fireplace of MADELINE, 19, demure, sad eyes, wears a gold necklace set with a huge ruby.

Ulrich sits at the head of a long table, Charles and Melinda sit to either side of him, the remains of dinner before them.

ULRICH

Are the rooms to your satisfaction,
Mr. Drayton?

CHARLES
Please, Your Grace, call me
Charles.

ULRICH
Then you must call me Ulrich.

MELINDA
Sir, you indulge us, but surely
such informal address would be
improper?

ULRICH
I insist, nay, command it of such
beauty.

Ulrich casts an approving eye upon Melinda.

ULRICH (CONT'D)
You are a lucky fellow, Charles.

Melinda blushes, Charles smiles proudly.

CHARLES
Indeed I am.

ULRICH
Do you have everything you require?

CHARLES
I have my canvas, brushes, paints,
and an incredible setting in which
to create.

ULRICH
Perhaps you could portray me in the
gardens. They really are the
finest in all of Austria.

CHARLES
An excellent idea, weather
permitting of course.

Poe enters, tops up the diner's glasses from a decanter.

ULRICH
I do hope you enjoy the wine, it is
from the finer end of my cellars.

CHARLES
Pardon me, Sir, but I notice that
you have but one manservant for
such a large estate.

ULRICH
My needs are few, I find Poe to be
more than capable.

Poe dips his head in gratitude.

ULRICH (CONT'D)

As I stated in our correspondence,
you must honeymoon as my guests
here. I assure you, the Summer
months are much more pleasant.

MELINDA

Such a generous gesture.

Charles gazes at Melinda, they gush at each other.

CHARLES

This year cannot pass quickly
enough.

ULRICH

Be careful of wishing one's life
away, it is all too fleeting, and
much more precious.

Charles looks to the portraits that cover the walls,

ULRICH (CONT'D)

All of the Redwinters are depicted
here, and now it is my turn to join
them on these ancient walls.

Melinda's eyes settle on Madeline's portrait.

ULRICH (CONT'D)

That is Madeline, my dear wife, I
love her as Charles obviously loves
you, Melinda. She died a long time
ago.

MELINDA

Apologies, I--

Ulrich cuts her off with a raised hand.

ULRICH

No need, you were not to know, it
was a tragic... accident that
befell her.

He rises.

ULRICH (CONT'D)

But now, I'm afraid I must excuse
myself from your delightful
company. Poe will see to anything
you require.

He kisses Melinda's hand, lingers for a beat.

Charles stands.

CHARLES
Good-night.

Poe opens the door for Ulrich.

INT. GUEST ROOMS - LATER

Melinda sits at a dressing table, looks into the mirror as she brushes her hair and prepares for bed.

Charles unpacks artist's equipment from a trunk.

CHARLES
This portrait will be my finest
work yet.

He stifles a yawn.

MELINDA
Did you notice how The Viscount
referred to his dead wife in the
present tense?

CHARLES
I didn't, what of it?

MELINDA
No matter, he's a strange, lonely
man indeed.

CHARLES
He certainly took a shine to you,
and who can blame him!

She smiles at the compliment.

Suddenly, the window flies open, allowing the storm's fury into the room, curtains billow, the lamps flicker.

MELINDA'S POV - MIRROR

Madeline stares back with dead eyes, pale skin, blood runs down her face.

MADELINE
Forgive me!

The mirror cracks.

BACK TO SCENE.

Melinda screams, runs into Charles' arms.

CHARLES
Whatever is the matter?

MELINDA

Didn't you see her?

She looks again, Madeline's face, and the crack, are gone.

MELINDA (CONT'D)

It was Madeline!

CHARLES

Madeline? Nonsense, my dear!

Melinda calms down, looks again to the mirror.

Charles closes the window.

CHARLES (CONT'D)

The storm gave you a fright, and
perhaps the wine has effected you
more than you realize.

Melinda keeps a wary eye on the mirror.

LATER

Lightning illuminates the room with staggered flashes.
Charles and Melinda are in a deep, unnatural slumber.

A section of the wall quietly slides open to reveal Poe.

He looks upon them with a wicked smile.

Poe lifts Melinda over his shoulder, carries her through the
secret door.

INT. CRYPT - LATER

Melinda rests upon the bier next to the casket, still asleep.

Ulrich reaches into the casket, brings out the same ruby set
necklace worn by Madeline in her picture.

He places it gently around Melinda's neck.

Ulrich closes his eyes, raises his hands to the ceiling.

ULRICH

Dark Lords, hear my plea!

Poe watches from the shadows with awe and malice.

ULRICH (CONT'D)

Blood and flesh, I crave from thee!

EXT. BERCHTESGADEN MOUNTAINS - REDWINTER CASTLE - NIGHT

The storm intensifies, thunder and lightning almost constant.

INT. TORTURE CHAMBER - LATER

Charles awakens, bound by straps to a wooden post set into the stone floor.

Evil devices are in the room, he gasps with revulsion and fear as his eyes come to rest upon a gore-soaked table.

The mutilated remains of the Coachman are strapped to it, abdomen sliced open, innards removed.

Blades, spikes, hooks, implements of pain, are arranged on a table. Poe admires each one with a gleam in his eye.

CHARLES

(groggy)

What in God's name?

POE

Up so soon? Next time I should use more poison.

CHARLES

Where's Melinda? Release me this instant!

POE

These, are my "pretty ladies".

Poe selects a serrated hook, strokes the metal, cherishes it.

POE (CONT'D)

I call this one Ruby, she's my most favorite pretty lady.

CHARLES

You're mad!

Poe moves closer, brings the hook to Charles' eye.

POE

I prefer my pretty ladies to the machines. You can get closer with the pretty ladies.

INT. CRYPT - NIGHT

Ulrich screams his dark ceremony, feverish, maniacal.

ULRICH

Hoc secretum nuntius ut qui legere latinam!

Melinda's breathing becomes rapid, shallow, she whimpers.

ULRICH (CONT'D)
Lorem ipsum dolor extrema et
mentiri non potest!

Dust swirls around the open casket, as if caught in a breeze.

INT. TORTURE CHAMBER - NIGHT

Poe admires the wound he inflicted upon Charles.

Charles grits his teeth, struggles against the straps.

POE
I think I'll allow Elizabeth to
spend some time with you next.

CHARLES
If you've hurt Melinda--

POE
She belongs to The Viscount now.

Poe selects a wicked bone saw, licks his lips.

Charles strains with all his strength against the bonds.

Poe looks towards Charles' foot.

INT. CRYPT - NIGHT

Melinda gasps, her back arches, eyes go wide, she screams.

ULRICH
Take this flesh as your own!

INT. TORTURE CHAMBER - NIGHT

Poe stands face to face with Charles with a look of spite.

Charles brings his head forward with all his strength,
smashes Poe square in the face with a solid head butt.

Poe howls, staggers back, falls disorientated to the floor.

Charles desperately tries to break his bonds.

Poe murmurs, begins to regain his senses.

INT. DINING HALL - MADELINE'S PORTRAIT - NIGHT

A powerful howl of wind kicks up dust, flickers lanterns as
it rips through the hall.

For a brief moment, the portrait seems to flicker, the likeness of Madeline replaced with Melinda's.

INT. TORTURE CHAMBER - NIGHT

Charles looks to the top of the pole, notices that it is not attached to the ceiling.

He shimmy's up the pole, loops the end of his bonds over the top and falls to the floor, bound but free from the pole.

He painfully rises, takes a knife from the table, frantically cuts his bonds as Poe stirs and begins to stand.

POE

You'll pay for that!

Poe roars in anger, charges, just as Charles cuts the last bond and turns to face Poe.

Poe runs onto Charles' knife.

It plunges into his stomach, he whimpers, looks down at the protruding knife hilt with wide eyed confusion and pain.

POE (CONT'D)

Fiona? You betrayed me!

Charles pushes Poe away with disgust, he slams into the wall, impaled through the neck by a hook, left hanging from it.

INT. CRYPT - NIGHT

Melinda stands before Ulrich, a strange smile on her lips.

MELINDA

(Madeline's voice)

It worked, my love.

ULRICH

Is it truly you?

MELINDA

(Madeline's voice)

Yes, we are together once more.

Charles limps in, the blade in his hand, blood on his shirt, bleeding from the wound on his cheek.

CHARLES

Melinda!

ULRICH

(calls out)

Poe!

CHARLES
Your odious dwarf is dead!

ULRICH
No matter.

The Viscount pounces with supernatural speed, grabs Charles' knife-hand and neck, smashes him into the wall.

Charles crumples, knocked senseless, the knife clatters to the floor.

Ulrich lifts Charles by his throat, sneers at him.

ULRICH (CONT'D)
I'll kill you with my own hands!

There is the sickening sound of steel slicing into flesh.

Blood pools at Ulrich's feet, his throat sliced open.

Melinda's face is twisted with anger, the knife in her hand.

Ulrich's pain turns to despair, he drops Charles.

MELINDA
(Madeline's voice)
I've waited sixteen years for my
revenge. Consider it now
satisfied, "Your Grace".

He falls to his knees, bloodied hands grasp at her hem.

The life drains out of him, she watches with grim satisfaction as he tries to speak, then gurgles his last.

Charles regains his senses, rises to his feet.

A strong breeze blows, candles flicker.

There is a soft pulse of crimson light, Melinda falls.

Charles runs to catch her, they both sink to the floor, Melinda in his arms, her head on his shoulder.

MELINDA (CONT'D)
(weakly)
Charles?

They cling to each other with relief, Melinda's eyes go to the casket, she smiles with a flicker of satisfaction.

INT. DINING HALL - MADELINE'S PORTRAIT - NIGHT

Her sad eyes are replaced with the haunted ones of Melinda.

FADE OUT: