

Exclusive Bonus Scene:

Jesu's Peril By J.D. Brown

We entered the swimming pool room together, my hand at Ema's back. I watched her as she scanned the area and scrunched her nose. The chlorine scent was a bit much, but she'd get used to it before long. I stepped away to lay my towel on a lounge chair and then removed my T-shirt. The collar pulled my hair over my face and I swept it back, catching a glimpse of Ema from the corner of my vision. She stared. Ogled, even. My lips curved and I glanced away so she wouldn't know she'd been caught.

My attention went to the water. Natural lakes and rivers possessed a magnetism that constantly called to me, like a stickiness that pulled at my skin. It made living on an island annoying. Since coming to Berlin, the feeling was much more muted. Yet, even a man-made tank of tap water had some calling, and my senses tingled.

I removed my shoes, went to the pool, and stepped on the water. Using my powers required very little thought. It came naturally, like breathing. The water below the pads of my feet froze solid. The ice nipped at my soles, making my ankles stiffen and my calves shiver. I was used to the feeling, though, and the cold ebbed before it could reach any higher. Pleased with myself, I walked to the center of the pool before turning around to gauge Ema's reaction. My smile grew at the slight furrow of her brow. She scoffed and lifted her hands to her waist.

"Don't tell me you're not going to get *in* the water."

"I will eventually," I said, lifting a hand towards her. "Join me."

She blushed and dropped her gaze. After a moment's hesitation, she slowly peeled off her top and then lowered her skirt. My throat dried and I struggled to swallow. The skirt alone had made my pulse jump earlier. Now, watching it slide down her lean, snow-white legs... Watching her straighten and step out of her clothes, her slender stomach exposed, the thin film of pink fabric failing to hide the curve of her small breasts... I clenched my fists and lowered my gaze for a moment to keep from tearing across the water and ravaging her. She'd been naked in front of me before, but I had kept my word and averted my gaze, being the gentleman. What I wouldn't tell her was that my aversion was as much for my sanity as it was for her modesty.

My gaze lifted as she came to the edge of the pool and paused. An impish grin curved her lips and she floated gracefully over the water, coming towards me. Pride swelled my chest at her powers. I fully expected her to not think of them and swim.

“I did not think you would do it.”

She lifted her chin to look me in the eyes and smirked. “You're not the only one with tricks.”

No, I'm not. Not at all. My gaze lowered to her hands and, as the pull of the water gnawed at me, an idea formed. I laced my fingers with hers and pulled her hands to my shoulders, where I draped them nicely about my neck. She was so petite and delicate, her skin soft like flower petals—which was appropriate, given the scent of her essence—it was difficult to resist moving faster. In another time, with another woman, I might have just pushed her against a wall and taken her. But this was Ema, our savior, and my life's only purpose. I watched her expression carefully as I placed my hands at her midriff. She looked perhaps surprised, perhaps shocked that would touch her, but she didn't protest, so I continued by leading her gently into a slow, easy waltz.

After a few steps and a turn, her gaze rose to mine and she laughed. “We’re dancing?”

“Yes.”

“There’s no music,” she said, but her voice was cheery.

My breath caught at my accomplishment and I grinned. “So?”

She studied me as though she wasn’t sure I was real, but then her expression relaxed and she followed my lead in the dance. I wasn’t very good at the waltz and kept my movements much slower and less complicated than the usual flair, but I didn’t think she noticed. Fort Ema, the style was far outdated. With each light step and small circle, her body relaxed beneath my touch. Her gaze soon went to the water, her dark hooded eyes dream-like. I wondered as to her thoughts, when the most amazing thing happened. She closed the small modest gap I’d placed between us and laid her head against my shoulder.

I tried not to celebrate overly, for fear of accidentally warding her off, yet the closeness required me to tighten my arms about her back in order to keep to the dance. I did so slowly, gauging her reaction, and high-fived myself in my mind when her grip tightened against my shoulders.

Her warm breath pooled against my neck and my pulse did jumping jacks. I’d longed to hold her like this, chastening myself for all the times I’d turned her away when she attempted advances toward passion. I wanted to be so much more than her protector. I wanted to make my feelings known, to explore them and the possibilities. Yet, more than anything, I wanted her reciprocation to be real—not a symptom of her bloodlust.

I mentally scolded myself in remembrance. She had just drunk a glass of blood before we came here. The whole reason I had suggested swimming was so that she could work out the lust through exercise. Instead, I had stupidly forgotten myself

and gave in to weakness, misreading her reactions as tender permission instead of seeing it for what it really was—impaired judgement.

And yet, how long did the bloodlust last? Dancing was a form of exercise. Who was to say the effects weren't already out of her system? But no, I wasn't so dumb as to listen to my own selfish desires and risk the chance. The only way to know for certain was to ask.

“Ema... are you still under the effects of the blood?”

She tensed, staying silent for several moments, and I feared her answer. But then her hold relaxed and her tone was strong with certainty. “No. Why?”

“No reason.” I was glad for her answer, happy and excited that her actions were indeed her own, and yet... extremely nervous at the implications. Was this just a fun dance between friends or... could she want more? Women were so much simpler when I didn't care as to the direction of their affections. It was silly, really. I'd never been denied before. I had no reason to think I would be denied now. Why not chance it?

I ended the dance, stopping in the exact same location where we began, making the quick decision to do this, to inquire to Ema's true feelings once and for all. My arms were still around her when she noticed we'd stopped. She looked up at me, a question in the single crease of her brow. I did all the right things. I was sure of it. I gazed into her eyes, lifted a hand to cup her cheek, and lowered until my mouth was just above hers. Her breath hitched in realization and, suddenly, Ema slipped from my hands and a splash of pool water sprayed my face.

My eyes popped open in stunned surprise at the vacant air I was hugging. Instinct flipped like a switch and I glanced down at the water below my feet. Ema had sunk below the surface. I hadn't thought to expand the ice I stood on to accompany her since she had been levitating, and I cursed myself for being so inconsiderate. Her powers were very new to her. She was still discovering how to

control them. When Ema didn't surface immediately, another inconsideration seized my chest.

Can Ema swim?

Panicked, I reigned in the ice and dropped into the water. My arm went around her and I pulled us both quickly to the edge of the pool where I threw her over the tile and then hoisted myself out of the water. She rolled away and coughed, spitting up water while pushing onto her elbows. I sighed in relief.

"Are you alright?"

She nodded, her lungs still fighting.

I helped her sit upright and then peeled her drenched hair from her face. "Sorry I did not catch you. You seemed to be doing fine on your own."

Her lungs calmed enough to speak and she glared at me. "Jesu did you... Where you about to kiss me?"

Heat rose my face as I pushed my hair back. "Ah... yes."

"Why?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Because I wanted to."

"But... Why?"

My mouth curved in a bashful grin. Was she really going to make me say it? "I think it is obvious."

She glanced around the room and lowered her voice. "We can't be together like that, Jesu."

My smile fell. "Why not?"

Her gaze narrowed as though she was angry with me, and she whispered. "We're related."

"Not really," I chuckled.

Her brow arched. "Oh?"

I shrugged. "We share one ancestor. No big deal."

“He’s your *father!*” she shrieked. “I’m practically your niece.”

My... niece? Ugh, I could have smacked myself. Why did I tell her about my father? I mean, obviously I had to, but I hadn’t meant it like *that*.

“Ema, you are hardly my niece. There are at least twenty generations between us.”

“Yet I still turned into a vampyre, didn’t I?”

I shook my head, trying to find the words to explain why this wasn’t the taboo she imagined. “That gene came from your father, who is *not* related to *my* father.”

“My mother’s genes sure helped,” she shouted. “All my powers come from European clans!”

I stared like an idiot, not knowing what to say. I loved Ema with everything I had, and here she was, rejecting me because of a misunderstanding. I really should have been more careful in how I worded things. She was of a different time, a different world. Yet, what if it wasn’t that difference? What if it was all an excuse to spare my feelings? What if she just... didn’t want me? After all, every advance she had made in the past had been done out of bloodlust. When sober, she avoided me and my affections. What reason did I have to ever hope otherwise?

Ema bit her lip and hugged her knees to her chest. “I’m sorry, Jesu, but we just... can’t.”

The words hurt. Like a dagger to the chest, it fuckin’ hurt.

I didn’t want to react. I was afraid I’d do something I would regret. So I withdrew into myself, silent. Ridged. Angry. If she had been anyone else... but she wasn’t. I was bound to Ema as her protector. I couldn’t just shrug it off and forget about it.

Yet I needed to move.

I went to the nearest escape—the one that whispered my name and pulled at my essence with promises of comfort—and lowered into the swimming pool water.

Swimming always helped me calm down, so I took to the deep end and began doing laps, beating my frustrations into the yielding water with every stroke of my arms and legs. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I heard Ema leave the room.