

Exclusive Bonus Scene:

Jesu's Torment By J.D. Brown

“Thank you for moving everything on such short notice.” I handed a tip to the bellhop.

“*Mien* pleasure, Prince Jesu.” He plucked the bill from my hand and nodded, stuffing the note into his uniform pocket.

The elevator at the end of the hall *dinged* and the doors swished open. Ema's scent filled the air with a rosy perfume. It cut deep, the wound of her rejection still fresh over my heart. *She doesn't want you. Not like that.* I couldn't even look her in the eyes as she slowly approached us.

“*Vell,*” said the bellhop. “I'll be on my *vay*. Here is your key.” He held out a plastic card. I reluctantly took it. This was not how I wanted her to find out. I didn't want her to see me leaving, but nothing ever went according to plan. *Mostly because she never listens to me.* Didn't she realize every decision—every thought—was for her benefit? *She will never see me as anything more than a creepy distant uncle.* Not that it mattered. I would protect her regardless.

“What's going on?” She tilted her chin and glanced at the card.

I turned to face the locked door. “I have my own suite now.”

“You're...moving out?”

The hurt in her voice stuck a knife in my chest and twisted it. Shit. “I will just be across the hall, Ema. Things will be easier this way.” *Easier for me to resist*

touching you. Easier for me to pretend we can just be friends when all I really want to do is kiss you one more time.

“Sure,” she murmured.

A long silence hung between us. Then the latch clicked as she opened her suite door. I bit my lip and then turned the handle to my own hotel room. *Just across the hall*, I reminded myself. *I can still keep an eye on her from here.* Yet she couldn't have been more out of reach if I had moved to China. I stepped inside and then closed the door behind me.

What am I doing? Falling in love with her wasn't part of the deal. Wasn't part of the premonition. But I fell anyway. Hard. And embarrassingly so. *She doesn't want you.* And why would she? She was a vampyre, for crying out loud. She came into it late, but it still made her higher than me. I was...nothing. Lower than nothing. If I wasn't the Prince's kid brother, I would have been another civilian, trying to blend in with the humans, keeping my head down, obeying the rules. She deserved better.

Fuck. I needed to break something or go for a swim. I went to the armoire and dug out my swimming trunks. *I'll swim until I give into exhaustion and drown.* Because that sounded like more fun than wallowing in self-pity.

I changed my clothes, grabbed a towel, and hustled to the swimming pool. Ema must still be in her suite. I wondered what she was doing as I tossed my towel against a vacant chair. *She's probably reading.* Ema was something of a bookworm. A historian. My mouth stretched into a grin as I remembered how flustered she'd been when she found out that humans knew very little of what really happened in their past. She had spent the better part of two months in Jalmari's library trying to make up for it.

Swim. I need to swim. I shook my muscles out a bit before diving into the deep end. I would do laps until my arms and legs were so raw, the pain would

numb out my ability to think. After a couple dozen laps, I began to relax and my essence eased into the serene undulated cocoon of life. Water was my favorite of all the elements. A perfect balance between solid and gas. Not like earth, always carrying the weight of the world. Not like air, invisible and taken for granted. Fire, though powerful, destroyed everything it touched. Water could choose to be a tranquil river nurturing life, or a hurricane of chaos. Water was yin and yang come together. It was no wonder that its energy fill me with a vigor very close to the same satisfaction as blood.

Had Ema felt that connection when we danced across the pool's surface? Surely not. She wasn't a Draugrian like me. But she had seemed to be in another world that night, her arms around my shoulders, our bodies so close with very little clothing between us...

And just like that, I was swimming through the pool with a massive erection.

Footsteps approached the door. I muttered a string of curses to myself. *Just what I need, company.* I hoped it was not some nice vampyre family with kids. The door swung open and Bridget stepped inside. This day couldn't possibly get any worse.

She noticed me and smirked. "I hoped you would be here."

I stopped swimming and floated, praying like hell that the blood in my neither regions would absorb back into my torso. Any time now.

Bridget stripped down to a tiny black bikini. The last time I saw that much of her body women wore petticoats. She took the stairs at the shallow end. Her golden irises never left mine as she waded into the water, 'trouble' etched into the lines of her up-turned lips.

"Bridget, I told you—"

"This room is open for all guests to use," she countered. "You can leave if you like."

I wanted to, but I couldn't get out of the water just yet.

"Why are you here, Bridget?"

"Same reason as you, I gather. Nice night for a swim."

"You know what I mean."

She lifted a slender shoulder to her chin and then let fall. She looked at me with what I knew was her idea of innocence. But I'd known her a long time. Whatever she was up to, it wasn't innocent. "Just doing my job."

"Training Ema?" I growled, because the cryptic answers grated on my nerves. "Who hired you?"

She laughed. "That's the best part, *mon amour*. It was one of your own."

"My— Oh. Naamah." That made sense. Naamah knew what Ema was, the role she was meant to play. But did he have to hire Bridget of all people?

She winked and tapped her nose. "You didn't hear it from me, though. Client confidentiality and all that."

I snorted, glad Naamah at least told her to keep her mouth shut.

"She's not the right girl, you know."

Great, here comes the hook.

"Don't look at me like that. For all the times you talked about her and painted pictures of her, it's as if the premonition was my own. The fated one is human. This girl is a vampyre." She looked me up and down and her demeanor softened. "What are you doing, Jesu?"

The question was rhetorical, but I still felt the need to answer it. To justify myself...because I *had* considered that I might be wrong. But I would not give Bridget the satisfaction. I worked my jaw and looked away.

"You love her, don't you? That's why you want her to be the one so badly, so you don't have to break another heart like you did mine."

My fangs clenched. Beneath the water, my fingernails broke the skin of my palms. The chlorine stung deep.

Bridget tilted her heart-shaped head to the side and pursed her lips. I could practically feel her eyes studying me, reading me like a book. “Perhaps she already broke yours.”

That’s it. I pushed past her to leave. She grabbed my wrist and pulled me back. I’d forgotten the years of training and strength hidden in that tiny body of hers.

“It doesn’t have to be like this. My offer still stands. Come back to me, Jesu. Let me take care of you.”

My chest tightened as I remembered Bridget’s words all those years ago. She had offered to help me find Ema. She offered to do anything...as long as I stayed and kept pretending to love her. What she refused to understand was that I always loved Ema. Always. Since the moment I saw her in my vision. *But Ema does not feel that way about me.* That changed things, didn’t it? Ema made her choice and I had to respect it. Maybe...if I could feel something, anything, for Bridget...maybe then I wouldn’t be so distracted and I could focus on just being Ema’s guardian.

I pulled Bridget against my chest and then swung her legs out from under her. She squealed in surprise but her shock quickly turned to laughter. Could I do this? We had many good years together. They would have been *great* years, if not for my selfishness. Bridget was a good homemaker. She was loyal to the bone and a fierce fighter. She was a good woman. A better person than I was. I would be so lucky that she took me back.

I stopped spinning and gently let go of her legs. She turned her back to me and rested her head against my chest. A content sigh animated her breath. *So lucky...* With one hand, I trailed pruned fingertips along her bicep and shoulder

then gripped her hard. With the other, I scooped her waist-length hair away from her neck and then bent to press my lips to her sweet forgiving skin. She leaned to the side, coaxing me further. Every muscle in my body stiffened, except for the one that mattered most. I willed myself to feel something. Anything. *And if I couldn't...*

I bent to kiss her again when a bright white light flashed through the window and the cracks outlining the door. For a brief second, it lit up the entire pool room like lightning. “What was that?”

“Probably nothing. A shortage in a fuse, or something.” Bridget waved a hand.

But something didn't feel right in my gut. “No. Stay here, I'm going to check it out.”

“Jesu, wait...”

I was halfway up the pool steps when the door swung open and the receptionist, Heidi, tumbled inside, dropping a pile of clean towels. She glanced vacantly at the heap of terracotta, and then looked up at me. Fear lit her eyes. The steel handrail bent under my grip. “Heidi, what's wrong?”

The plump woman took a moment to find her voice. Then... “She's gone, sir. Ema is gone.”