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How To Disappear

by Mia Sundby

Isobela Rhinde fiddled with her mask. How could something that only covered the top half of her face be so hot? And all the ridiculous gilt filigree on it was itchy.

Even stood as close to the open doors --and the night air beyond-- as she was, Isobela felt oppressed by the ceremony of it all; the masks affixed to guests' falsely-smiling faces, fans fluttering like hands twitching to strangle each other, and the sheer *weight* of precious stones these nobles heaved around the room with them.

Any excitement she'd felt at the thought of attending a ball --dressing in an extraordinary gown, dancing for the first time in years, sipping expensive wine she didn't have to pay for-- had withered within the first minute of standing in the vast ballroom. Though she leaned against the stone column behind her, her back was ram-rod straight, and she couldn't shake the sensation that every pair of eyes was latched onto her. Prowling.

She smelled his perfume a moment before he arrived. Swilling his wine, Ashir sighed, "It's enough for one to crave a stake through the heart."

Isobela's muscles loosened a fraction as she looked over at the vampire. He cut quite the image, wearing a gleaming black half-mask, with the left eye sliced out to reveal his face,

matched with a set of long flowing robes, and a billowing silk cape pooling from the shoulders to the floor.

She smiled at him. "You should've said; I would've brought one with me."

He lifted a brow. "In that dress? Hardly." Sipping from his goblet, he shrugged, "Still, what do I know of trying to sneak things into ladies' gowns... Ask me later in the evening."

She smirked. "With me, Ashir, a stake is only ever a brisk walk away."

He eyed her. "Assuring yet vaguely threatening, Ser Rhinde, how do you do it..." His fangs flashed as he smiled and raised his goblet to her. "To surviving this gods-awful party?" Isobela chinked her empty goblet against his. "To surviving."

Positioning himself beside her in a languid lean only a vampire could achieve, he levelled his gaze out towards the throng of whispering, cackling, gesticulating nobles. The details of their conversations were drowned out by the orchestra playing beautifully in several parts of the vast room, rendering the ballroom scene to a strange, masked mime performance.

Isobela frowned at them all. "How have you managed to live here for a century?"

Ashir shrugged, sending his robes rippling. "One grows used to them. It might sound foolish, but it's rather like a watered-down version of vampire coven life."

Isobela turned to look at him. "Coven life? I thought you said you never lived with other vampires?"

"Now, now, Issy, we mustn't go constructing rumours." A sip of wine. "It's rude."

With what Isobela thought was incredible patience, she waited for Ashir to continue.

Seeing her stare, he sighed, "Fine. When I was rather young--"

"How young were you?"

"Sorry?"

“How young were you?”

“That’s a little overbearing of you, Rhinde, don’t you know it’s rude--?”

“Ashir, you haven’t physically aged since death, I don’t think you’re actually allowed to be precious about your age.”

Ashir’s one visible eye blinked at her, mildly scandalised. After a moment of ruffled silence, he said shortly, “When I had lived perhaps twenty years as a vampire, I lived with a coven of other vampires for some time. For, I don’t know, Rhinde, less than a century. For eighty-three years, my goodness.”

Isobela’s lips crept up into a smile below her mask. “Thank you. And this,” she gestured expansively, taking in the glittering gold ornaments, rich, expensively-dyed fabric and hour-long hairdos, “Is watered-down?”

Ashir’s exposed eye followed her gesture. “Yes. For one thing, there’s less blood.”

They were quiet for a moment, watching the pantomime play out before them. Watching hackles raise, barbs trade and drinks spill conveniently over gowns. Isobela wanted to stab someone.

Resisting the urge, she asked, “Why did you leave?”

Ashir didn’t ask what she meant. His eye darkened, brow forming a hard line above it.

Not turning to her, he muttered, “I saw too much blood.”