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## **Cotillion**

### Cotillion

The sky was a velvet shade of obsidian as five-hundred-dollar high heels slid on icy cobble; it was the only night they would ever be worn. Cat-eyed girls floated up to the massive stained glass doors. They led their partners on invisible leashes into the frigid December night of this cotillion ball, humming odd tunes through dark lipstick. The heavy doors shone with transparent art of a massive cherry blossom tree. The snow fell in a violent manner as three of the damsels spoke in hushed tones by the ancient gas lamps outside the castle of a home.

“Have you seen Petunia tonight? She looks absolutely divine!” said one, tucking a brittle curl behind her ear.

The annual cotillion. A quiet evaluation of etiquette and poise was to take place tonight; graceful waltzes and impeccable small talk were to be displayed for hours on end, leaving the young women to leer at each other’s cracked edges.

“Why, of course! She made her entrance about an hour ago. I spoke to her earlier, and she was ever so kind,” said another.

The third girl rolled her porcelain shoulders back and tipped her chin up with a huff. Her companions took no notice of this and continued to let their teeth shine, and giggles ring out as they rehearsed their kind words, hoping to impress potential suitors at the ball with their exalted speech and intelligent diction. The third girl looked out the open doorway and squinted through the thunderous flurries. Her name was Dahlia, and this weather was preventing her long-awaited bloom. She wore a deep red, strapless gown with embellished crystalline roses along her bodice, sleeves, and neckline. Her eyes shone paler than the moon hanging over the manor, and her gown swallowed her whole as she turned to marvel at the foyer’s looming chandelier, hoping for a glimpse of her beloved.

Ludicrous thoughts raced through her curl laden head as she stared gloomily at herself in the gaudy mirror hanging near the entrance. Surrounded by the embellishments on the walls, she recalled their meeting and how it changed her, how she had walked into the old banquet hall and seen a girl sitting alone beneath an oil painting of a cardinal, its red feathers bright as the sun against a background of icicles. Dahlia could so vividly recall how she had seen the girl’s pearly skin at an earlier dinner party and thought about how she had galaxies wrapped up her eyes as if the Milky Way herself was sitting right there--a tiny piece of the universe. The girl had been looking about the space with loving eyes, nurturing the world with her gaze. Dahlia had gone home that night and lain on her bed all night long, dreaming about breathing in her angel’s perfume and wrapping her in silk sheets. Dahlia gazed into the mirror and felt her heart swell in her throat as she fiddled with the folds of her dress.

Dahlia wondered if Milky Way would be here tonight, if she would grace this foolish ordeal with her smooth skin and soft voice. She stared at twinkling crystals overhead and simply thought to herself. Dahlia thought about Milky Way, how she was perfect, even though they had never spoken, how her nails would trace the rim of her glass, and how she answered to no one. No one but the stars in the night sky and the stars in her eyes, her wispy blonde hair, and her plush pink lips. Wondering about Milky Way’s dresses and her sparkle and her everything, Dahlia pondered all these things and thought about how she could only ever look. She knew this world was no place for her and that Milky Way’s place was a much more sophisticated one.

The foyer of the castle itself shook with dread when old grand pianos began to sing the old lyrics of a waltz, and

couples flooded onto the main dance floor. They paired up into teams of nymphs and elves for just a few moments at a time and stole breaths inches from each other's muzzle. Breaths were sucked in as the makeshift performers awaited the first note with which they were to step. Time had stopped underneath that grandiose chandelier and the murals that framed it.

Before she even knew what was happening, claws grabbed her wrist, and she was whisked away by some wolf in a gray suit, spun by her arm, and tiptoed out onto the dance floor to the score of the music, a helpless dame at the whim of her partner. She could feel the color drain from her quaint face as her thoughts muddled; the once beautiful ballroom became an abstraction of swirling bouquets and gowns as her partner growled and threw sly expressions her way.

Regardless of how long she had been dancing, all at once, the twirling became too much, and she threw her head back, looking at the ceiling spinning with her. Dahlia breathed the cool air that seemed to float above the mass of dancers, and when she came back down, her hair fell out of place, cascading down her exposed back. Blinking back the tears welling at her waterline, she desperately looked for anything to focus on. Flying by were the tables of virgin refreshments and corners occupied by more fortunate partygoers, snickering at the organized chaos of the waltz.

As the air grew hotter and pulses grew faster, every surface in the glowing ballroom froze over in a second when Dahlia caught a familiar smile sparkling a little way over. Milky Way was there and she was dancing with some dog, letting her soul sprinkle out onto the golden oak wood beneath their shuffling feet. The wolf leading her was clad in an opaque black suit, eyes made of emeralds and sneer made of wax. Milky Way had a graceful way of falling into each step, but her partner stomped across the dance floor with all the power he thought he held, practically flinging her around the couples with each spin. But Dahlia saw that Milky Way's dress had come alive under in the candlelight, and the pure white fabric shimmered with every movement she made. Her toned limbs completely embodied every step of the dance perfectly--she *was* the waltz. Dahlia felt her heart jump right into her closing throat; the moment had come to switch partners and, when the note took hold of the room, she spun right past Milky Way; she swore that for just a moment, their eyes met.

As time froze still, Dahlia gorged on the few brief moments she had to look at her love, hungrily drinking in her comet-like pupils and long lashes. The soft pause gave Milky Way a millisecond to breathe, and she let her chest rise and fall as she sucked in a life-giving breath. The dance enthralled her and she let it eat her alive; those shooting stars were more fierce than they'd ever been as she blazed by with a phoenix on her heels. Dahlia mustered every fiber of her being to savor this moment, knowing it was the closest she would ever come to golden fantasy.

But the moment was short-lived. Suddenly, a particularly clumsy couple who had been sipping on impure drinks took a tumble right off the dance floor and went crashing straight into one of the cables controlling the chandelier. At first, the woman giggled and tripped over her own feet when her husband swung her by the wrist into the marble pillar. Then her body collided with the column. The back of her skull shattered against one of the mechanisms holding the chandelier aloft. Cables snapped. Metal fractured under its own weight. The chandelier plummeted to the dance floor. A few were too drunk to realize what had happened until the calamity was upon them, while others let out shrill screams over the singing strings. The dancers clung to one another and bolted every which way, heels breaking on the floor and jewelry plunging to the ground. In an instant, bodies were crushed beneath polished diamonds.

Shrieks erupted from every direction as crimson liquid seeped from the wreckage. Howls of names, dukes and duchesses crying out in pain and horror, people pleading for help from all the gods in the universe. Dahlia saw nothing and felt even less, grasping for frilly dresses or torn tapestries. Then she opened her eyes and the world seemed to ooze away when she saw her angel staggering toward the shattered stained glass. She pushed herself up from the pile of debris, letting her dress tear away. Once she was free from her transparent restraints and let three thousand dollars flutter away from her body--a gift from her mother who had hoped it would draw the attention of the partygoers--her vision came back into focus for just a sliver of a second. A cardinal's feathers were falling away against the moonlight.

Standing in the grand entranceway of the mansion, Milky Way stood with her mangled arm dangling at her side, tattered gown, and makeup streaming down her face as she let out the ugliest sobs imaginable. Snot gushed out of her nose and flowed down her chin, dripping into her mouth and smearing her carnation-pink lipstick. The velvet murmurs that once flowed out of her had become a patchwork of raspy wails. She was bawling and running her hands through tangled, straw-like hair. Her eyes were red and her face was swollen, leaving her a shell of who she

was mere minutes before.

She, who had just moments before, only answered to the stars in the sky and the stars in her eyes.

Dahlia was completely appalled by the scene before her and what it had done to her most cherished Milky Way. Emotion flooded her veins, pressuring her from angles, pushing her forward to act. She let the glass dig into her feet as she moved, gritting her teeth against the white-hot pain. The ballroom before her had become a battlefield as she fought through injured dancers to reach her destination. When she finally reached Milky Way, she felt fate whisper in her ear as she laid her hand on her goddess for the first time in her life, compelling her to show the world what love really meant.

Now she stood still, and the world twirled and spun around her. Gasping for air, Dahlia clutched a skewer of crystal from the chandelier so tightly her palms trickled with wine. She was the wolf and Milky Way was the screaming, cowering, imperfect dame. Blood burgeoned from the dame's chest and stained her white gown, while curses spilled from her cracked lips and dribbled down her chin. Freedom engulfed the she-wolf as her aching body committed most unspeakable acts, feeling completely fulfilled for the first time since stepping into that marble fortress of the cotillion.

As the dagger grew warm in her hands, Dahlia captured more freedom in her movements, no longer conscious of the fragility of her weapon. She grunted and snarled, baring her teeth as she brought the crystal down harder until she could hear it scraping on the marble floor beneath her beloved. She sunk to all fours, slamming her knee against Milky Way's chest, hearing the splintering of bones sing like the grand piano. When the screaming devolved to wheezing and finally into silence, Dahlia gathered the carcass into her arms and embraced it tightly.

Dahlia dragged the body out to the snowy courtyard, leaving a wicked pathway in her wake. She cut deep and let Milky Way's once perfect chest blossom; she crossed her legs to retain purity and splayed out the mangled arm, crucifying her on a bed of fluff in the center of a circle of long-dead flowers. She posed the body like a porcelain doll, the kind you leave on a shelf and never play with. Dahlia acted as if some foreign instinct guided her motions, an invisible puppeteer floating high in the sky. Her eyes were empty and hollow as that of a blind man; her skin was splayed and blood was drying on her limbs in the cold. She was satisfied.

The ancient gas lamps flickered their own waltz over her body, and Dahlia found herself shivering when police cars and ambulances drove up the long driveway to the manor. Blood seeped from the carcass and formed wings in the snow far too large and clumsy for a mere cardinal. Dahlia absently wrapped her arms around own her thin frame, peering at nothing. The soft candlelight was replaced with flashes of blue and red, soaking Milky Way in fluorescents. With the sirens blaring and the storm dying down, a beastly girl finally bloomed in the snow.