

Part 11: A Night to Remember (Kristoph)

(Teri and Kristoph finally go out on a date. Told from Kristoph's Perspective)

"Table for two? The reservation was in the name of 'Kristoph'?" I watched as the server, a gray fox in a black suit, looked down at the digital display of the tablet behind his podium. With a slight snort and a scowl, he nodded to me and walked out onto the dining hall. Following him led me to a small table in the corner of the restaurant. With a flick of his wrist and a lighter, the fox lit the candle in the center of the table, shadows dancing along the tablecloth.

"Would monsieur like a beverage?" He said, his tone stiff and disapproving of what was obviously a kid in his father's old suit. "We have a variety of drinks for our, ahem, younger patrons. Perhaps a glass of milk?"

"Wow, rude." I scowled. "You treat all your customers under twenty-one like that?"

"Of course not, sir." He gave a sly smirk, before turning to walk off. "Just the poor ones." He placed two leather menus on the table and began to walk off. "Your waiter will be around with water and bread soon."

A slight growl escaped my lips, as I tried my hardest to resist the urge to snap back at him. Logically, I knew there was no reason to make a scene. The waiter would be nicer, certainly, and I wouldn't have to deal with a smug jerk of a Maitre 'D again. Taking a seat, I looked out over the restaurant. *Alejandro's* was the closest thing the town around our college had to a fancy restaurant: The staff dressed in fine outfits, the food was expensive, each table was candle-lit, and just past the bar was a small wooden floor for couples to dance. Persistent music played from up above, slow and lilting, as I watched pairs of dancers waltzing and twirling to calm down.

It was working well, until it suddenly occurred to me that I didn't actually know how to dance.

Panic gripped me just as my fingers gripped at the tablecloth. I'd picked *Alejandro's* just because I'd been trying to impress Teri. A chance to get dressed up, eat some high quality food, and impress a date. Everyone knew the restaurant was the fanciest place in town! I didn't know there was a dance floor before I got there. What if Teri loved to dance? If he invited me out there, I'd either have to decline and risk losing his favor, or go out there and make a fool of myself. Whimpering, I slapped my face with my left paw. I wanted this night to be perfect. Magical. A Night to Remember. And now I was terrified that I was going to mess things up! Not to mention that that jerk of a Maitre'D had made me all worried.

The waitress interrupted my angst by placing down a crystal glass of ice water in front of me. "Hey, welcome to Alejandro's, I'm your waitress, Julia, and I'll looking after you today! Now, if you need anything just let me know, ok? Have you selected a beverage?"

“N-no, not yet. I’m sort of waiting for someone.” I took a menu from her, before looking up. “Um, Julia? Can I ask you a question?”

Her smile rained down at me as she stood in above me, facing my table. “Oh, of course! I am perfectly ready to answer any questions about our menu, chef’s specials, or anything at all!”

A finger slid down the collar of the suit I was wearing, tugging on it. I felt a bit hot in it, and more than a little nervous after the encounter with the Maitre ‘D. Did I really look poor? “Um, how do I look, do you think?”

The smile across her face widened. “Marvelous, sir! Like a million bucks!” With a thrust of her arm, she gave me a big thumbs up.

It took me a moment to realize I was asking my waitress about how I looked. Not exactly an unbiased opinion. With a sigh, I corrected myself. “Look, I PROMISE I’ll tip you more if you give me an honest answer and not what you think I want to hear.”

The girl’s porcelain smile broke. “Ok, in all honesty, you’re attractive, but you look kiiiiind of like a kid wearing his dad’s suit.” The smile flattened to a grimace, Julia’s tone conciliatory. “The sleeves are too long, so they’re running up into your palms. I can see where your body is pressing against the outfit like it wasn’t tailored for you, and I think it’s just a bit too short for your height. You look like you crammed yourself into that thing, and it’s not the best look for you. Sorry.”

“It’s a nice suit!” I snapped at her, perhaps a bit too defensively.

Her paws shot up in front of her, as did the notepad she carried, a barrier between herself and my snarling. “It is! It is!” After a moment of silence, she lowered them again. “You look handsome, it’s juuuuust... not perfect, you know?”

My ears went flat. My hackles dropped. Her comment provoked me to look back down at my outfit: A dusty brown suit coat with a gray undershirt and matching necktie. Suede elbow patches graced the suit coat, just a shade darker than the rest of the top. Below the brown belt I wore was a large pair of cream-colored pants and a nice pair of shoes. Sure, it was really tight on me, but it had been a good outfit for my dad, who was only a bit shorter than me-

And then suddenly, I realized her point.

I was sitting around in a hand-me-down suit, something fitted for my dad. I probably looked like a dork. Would Teri laugh at me and just leave? Feeling panic growing in my gut, I buried my head in my paws.

The feline waitress' tail swished along the floor, as she closed her eyes and flashed a more sincere smile. "Aww..." leaned down, and I felt her patting at my back. "If it makes you feel any better, you're hardly the first poor college student dressed like that. And you don't look bad, sir. But you asked for the truth." With that, she turned and retreated as fast as she could do while still walking.

I watched her scurry away, eager to get away from my panicky fit. And as I watched her go I found I couldn't really blame her. "Bluh, she's right. I'm probably worrying about this way too much..." I slouched down in the chair, mumbling and trying to get a grip on my emotions. I might have just this one shot, and I didn't want to blow it! But everything felt like it was going wrong already! Slouching in my chair, I nursed my water and thought about my problems. I just wanted to take a cute tiger out for a night on the town and make a good impression. And instead, I'd gotten rude restaurateurs, anxiety about my lack of dance moves, and concerns about my dad's old suit. Was the night just going to keep getting worse?

"Oh! Don't you look nice!"

"Was that sarcasm?" I looked up at who was speaking.

He'd put his hair up, long brown curls piled up over his head, golden glitter combed into the light bown of his hair. It shimmered in the candlelight. The white, orange, and black of his fur was immaculately groomed, not a single hair out place. Teri was wearing a black suit with a bright pink-petaled flower pinned to his right lapel. His suit had been pressed and cleaned, clinging to his slender body with the kind of fit that almost seemed custom tailored. A black belt with a gleaming silver belt buckle was wrapped around his waist. He was leaning on a black cane with a polished crystal tip. And then suddenly I felt underdressed. My face felt hot as he pulled out a chair and sat down. "Why would it be sarcasm?" The tiger flashed me a smile. "I wouldn't have asked you out if I didn't think you cleaned up well."

"T-thanks." I stuttered again, sitting up straight and taking a long sip of water.

"I'm a little surprised that you picked a place like this. *Alejandro's* is pretty expensive for a few poor college students." He swayed in his chair. "You know, I wouldn't have minded a more casual place, right?"

A weak smile crossed my face. "I know. But I wanted to impress you. Something like what you were used to growing up, you know?"

He didn't respond back. At least not with words. Teri broke eye contact, ears flat. He was staring down at the flickering candle and saying nothing. A moment of silence passed between us.

“Sooo...” I grit my teeth. Things were going nowhere. “I wanted to thank you for doing this. For giving me a second chance.”

The tiger’s eyes lit up. “Ah! Well, I mean, at this point we’ve both seen some of each other’s negative traits.” The tiger sighed. “There’s a bit of comfort in that.” He smiled, as he sat up straight. “I mean, if you’ve seen me at my worst and you’re still around, it gives me hope that you’ll be able to put up with me.” The smile turned into a coy smirk. “Plus, I like your abs.”

“I, er, um.” I stammered, blinking and losing what cool I’d regained. What was it about this cat that let him always catch me off guard?!? Clutching at the table, I found my courage. I wasn’t the blushing virgin anymore. I refused to let myself just trip over everything in front of a cute guy. “I really like your butt...”

The tiger gasped, putting a paw to his chest, blue eyes wide. “Gracious! How lewd you are, to comment on my body as if I were just a piece of meat!” His tail swished behind him at a rapid pace. “I am simply SCANDALIZED!”

A whine escaped from me. “B-b-but you did it first!”

The tiger started snickering. “I’m just teasing you, cutey-woof! Lighten up!” He grinned at me, and I found myself smiling back. The tension between us had just vanished. I found my worries about the night drifting far from my conscious mind. Both of us opened our menus, looking over our options. “Seriously, I don’t mind being complimented about my body.” The tiger purred, leaning forward and putting his head on his paws.

“Hiiiiii! I’m Julia, your waitress!” The cheetah approached again, as she stood in front of Teri and bounced. “It’s such a pleasure serving you tonight! How can I make your night a bit better?” She giggled, her tail straight up behind her.

“Yeah, I think I’m ready to order-” I started.

She bent down in front of Teri. “Now, if you just need ANY old thing, let me know ok?” She giggled at him. “By the way, you look absolutely FANTASTIC dressed like that today, Mr. Bahduri!”

It was the first time I’d heard anyone use Teri’s last name. Teri blinked, narrowing his eyes for a moment, his muzzle curled into a slight frown. But only for just a moment. After that, I watched a smile form on his face. “Well, I think I might have a soup and salad.” Teri smiled. “Can I hear what the soup of the day is?”

“Um, and can I get the-” I started again.

“Hahaha! The soup of the day is a nice red clam chowder.” She was all smiles towards Teri, but actually turned her body away from me.

I growled, baring my fangs.

Her body went stiff. “Oh! Hahaha, how silly of me!” She smiled and looked down at me. “I’m terribly sorry about that! I guess I just forgot that you were there!”

“Did I do something to offend you or something?” I found myself glowering at her.

“Oh no!” She waved a paw at me, scoffing. “It’s just we’d already seen each other, so I wanted to focus on your charming dinner companion!” With a smile and a purr, she nodded. “So what would you like?”

With a heavy sigh, I closed my menu. “I’d like the ribeye steak with garlic mashed potatoes and asparagus. Medium-rare, please.”

Julia nodded rapidly, writing down my order. After a moment, Teri ordered a spring salad and a bowl of the clam chowder, which she quickly wrote down as well. “Oh! Very good, sirs! We’ll be back with your food once it’s made! If you want, you guys can go down to the dance floor and we’ll alert you when your food is at your table. Now, we do have a live band here tonight, and if you want, you can go check them out in person to hear them more clearly. Let me know if you have any questions or requests, and thanks for coming to our restaurant tonight!” After bowing, she turned and walked away with our orders.

I tried to resist the urge to bite her. “That was really rude of her.”

Teri looked away. “I wouldn’t really be too harsh with her. It wasn’t you.”

I raised an eyebrow. “No?”

He nodded. “She was my waitress last time I came here.”

“What do you mean by that?” I didn’t quite see where he was going with that.

Teri let out a low, pronounced sigh as he looked over towards a family seated next to us. Following his gaze, I watched as a badger held chunks of cut meat up for his baby girl, seated in a specialized infant’s chair with a tray. “I’d... really rather talk about something else, puppy.”

My face fell. “O-oh.” I definitely knew enough about Teri’s mannerisms to know I’d stepped on a landmine there. I needed a change of conversation. “I really like what you did with your hair!” I blurted out the first thing that had come out of my mouth, and knowing that, I had to double

down on it. "The gold glitter looks really cool with your brown hair. But how do you keep it from getting all over your outfit."

His eyes lit up, as Teri's ears perked. "Oh! Wow, I had hoped you'd notice, but I didn't think you would. He giggled. "It's a fur and hair gel with some glitter mixed in, so it sticks to the hair. My hair's actually a pretty high percentage product tonight." He grinned. "Keep me away from any open flames, unless you want the most fabulous explosion ever."

"Hah!" I felt my muscles relaxing, as I leaned back in my chair. "But what a way to go, right?"

The tiger gave me a sly grin. "It has its perks. Dying in a boom of glitter and shiny colors is at least 7th on my top ten preferred ways to go out."

Propping my head on my right arm, I smiled over at him. "Oh? Out of morbid curiosity, what takes number one on the list?"

The tiger's tail swished eagerly behind him. "Oh, no contest! Jumping into a vat of fancy chocolate sauce and seeing how much I can eat before I drown in it."

"Wow, that is both dark AND delicious!" My tail was wagging. "Ok, this might be the worst conversation to have on a date with a guy."

"Naaah." Teri stuck out his tongue. "I'm pretty sure the absolute worst one begins with 'Let's talk about how much weight you've put on in the last month.' or maybe 'So you know, I've been seeing this amazing girl...'"

I broke out laughing. "Hahahahahaha!" A moment later, I was catching my breath. "This is like, a good example of the twenty seventh reason why I couldn't get over you."

Teri's eyes went wide. His ears perked up. "Twenty... seventh?"

"Yeah." I locked eyes with his, looking into those muddy brown pools. "Math student here. Of course I numbered the reasons. Until I ran out of numbers, anyway."

Teri stroked his chin. "Uh, so what's the reason?"

"You just have this way of making me feel at ease." I smiled. "I'm a worrier. Like my mom. Sometimes it feels like I just invent more problems to worry about. I get stuck in my head and worry that I'm being too forward or too slow or too dense or reading into things that aren't meant to be more than skin deep." I threw a paw forward on the table for emphasis. "I mean, you saw me when we first met. I was so terrified about what me being gay meant that I MADE it into meaning something like a prison sentence."

"Kristoph-

He started, but I was on a roll. "No, I mean it. I made a cage to trap myself. And you were the one who let me out." After a moment, I looked down at the tablecloth, playing with some cream packets in a container in the center of the table. "And that's just part of who you are, you know?" I was stacking cream containers in a pyramid pattern to help me think. "You reach out to people. You take an interest in them. You might be a bit aggressive sometimes, but you just have this way with people. Or at least with me. When I'm around you, you set my mind at ease. I feel calmer, better, just by talking with you. I mean, before you got here, I was practically torturing myself."

"Wait, what?" Teri coughed and sputtered. "Why would do that to yourself over a dinner date?"

I tugged one of the bottom plastic cups of creamer away to watch them fall. The question called to mind my father. He'd called my behavior out: I was a worrier. Just like mom. Then I thought about that snotty fox working the front counter. And the waitress' disdain of my outfit. Not to mention her clear preference for my date over me. "Because of a few words certain people said. Because I felt like I didn't deserve you. Because you're someone cultured and good at reaching out to people and dress really well and could date almost anyone and..." I sighed. "And I'm socially anxious and worry about every little thing. In the end, you're amazing and I'm just some kid wearing his dad's threadbare suit, worried you're gonna find out I don't know how to dance."

I heard the sound of a chair sliding out. Then I felt Teri's paw on my shoulder. "Come on."

With a tug, he tried to pull me up by my shoulder. After a moment to recover from surprise, I let him. "W-woah!" I whimpered, as Teri's paw slid down my arm and gripped my paw. "Teri, where are we going? We just ordered our meals!" He was pulling me behind him, almost like a parent tugging a child.

The tiger turned his head back, with a sly smile on it. "We're going dancing."

(Continue to "A Night To Remember: Teri")