

Part 12: A Night To Remember: Teri

-Before-

Fussing with my hair had taken at least forty minutes, plus a shower that had served the mutual purpose of full body exfoliation. After that I'd spent a good thirty minutes brushing my fur to lay flat. And THEN, I had some trouble finding a florist's I could get a good corsage from, which hadn't even occurred to me until a few hours before the date. But the preparation was as much intentional as a way of soothing my nerves. I had butterflies in my stomach, the whole time. It wasn't exactly because I was dating Kristoph, though. Not entirely.

It was because he'd wanted to go THERE.

I knew why he'd wanted it. *Alejandro's* was the closest thing to fancy dining our sleepy college town had. The puppy was trying to go all-out to impress me. He wanted to woo me with a fancy date, and what was a fancier date than a candlelit dinner and dancing? He really just wanted to show me a good time. The sincerity of it was sweet, if a bit misguided. I didn't have the heart to tell him no. Even though I had misgivings. Because just thinking about *Alejandro's* left a sour taste in my mouth. The first, and only time I'd been there before was when daddy had come to town. The night I nearly drank myself to death.

But, because he was being a sweetie, I couldn't find it in my heart to say no. So instead, I pruned and preened myself like a peacock. I wore the nice dress slacks that Xavier'd talked me into buying, and the only suit and tie I still owned. I called in every favor I had and even made a few dark pacts to get the belt and accessories from friends. I couldn't feel good about going, but I could at least dress like a million bucks.

But it'd been a time consuming process, and in the end, I was ten minutes late. I tried to text my puppy, but he never responded. In the end, I found myself standing in the parking lot, staring at the large, shimmering sign announcing the restaurant to the world. The *Alejandro's* sign was an enormous, gaudy thing, glimmering neon letters with LED lights underneath them. Standing near the building made my fingers clench. For a moment, I honestly tried to come up with an excuse not to go in. But it was just for a moment, before I started feeling a bit disgusted with myself. There I was. All dressed up and desperately trying to not have a place to go. On some level, I knew it was stupid. I knew it was stupid.

It was stupid that my dad had so much power over me I was scared of going into a restaurant he took me too just ONCE.

Taking a deep breath, I walked in.

The server, a gray fox smelling of thick cologne, dropped his stylus when I told him the name of my reservation. He remembered me. And judging by the looks from some of the staff as we

passed, so did many of the wait staff. How much money had daddy SPENT here? I hoped they didn't expect me to be as generous... My ears drooped. This was a mistake. I knew it was. I should have nudged Kristoph towards another restaurant. Heck, a cheap fast food salad would have been preferable to-

And then I saw him slumping at the table, and everything was better.

He looked handsome. The carob-colored coat he was wearing went well with the gray of his tie. His pants were tight enough to make me purr as I traced my eyes up them. His hair was combed nice and neat, and the color of his undershirt complimented his fur color very well. He'd spent time brushing his hair. But even as it started to get less neat, it looked nice on him. I didn't even know he owned nice shoes, but they were polished and glinted in the light. Judging by his posture, he was as worried about the night as I was. That actually made me relax a bit.

"Oh! Don't you look nice!" I smiled for the first time that evening, walking over towards the table.

He jerked up off the table, looking around for a moment. Poor puppy, I'd started him! "Was that sarcasm?" Finally, after he blurted out a response, he turned to see me, blue eyes widening.

It felt good to be stared at. After standing in front of him for a moment so he could drink in my outfit, I circle the table to reach a seat opposite of his. "Why would it be sarcasm?" a gentle laugh escaped my lips as I smiled to reassure him of the purity of my intent. "I wouldn't have asked you out if I didn't think you cleaned up well."

"T-thanks." I took note of that stutter of his as he swung his glass of water up to his lips for a sip. He was still nervous, and I didn't know why. Was I doing something to intimidate him?

Eager to help him relax, I tried to make some small talk with the poor nervous dog. Minutes passed between us, with the pressure in the air lowering as we joked and flirted with each other. It was nice to be able to tease him about his amazing abs again. I managed to relax for a bit, not thinking about the last time I'd been here. It was a single perfect moment with an adorable, sexy man. Who somehow only managed to be more cute when he was tripping over himself trying to say the right thing. It was then, at that moment, that I remembered why I had asked Kristoph out. Because he made set my mind at ease. Because he, just by being himself, made me feel relaxed and happy. Because he accepted me for who I am.

"Hiiiiii! I'm Julia, your waitress!" That voice made my ears perk. When she and I had met before, daddy wrote her a check to make our table a special priority. I never saw how much he gave her, but she had fawned over us both the whole night. And judging by the saccharine sugary-sweet tone, she remembered me as well as I remembered her. The spotty cheetah in the white apron and matching uniform had undone one button along her top, and was making sure to lean forward and bounce for me. It might have been flattering if I was convinced she saw me as anything more than a wallet with legs and arms.

Kristoph coughed. "Yeah, I think I'm ready to order-"

But she was having none of it. She didn't even twitch an ear at what he said, and making matters worse, the ambitious employee was bringing her a-game to try and charm a gay man with her womanly wiles."Now, if you just need ANY old thing, let me know, ok?" She had continued, even going so far as to use a cutesy expression like "any old" to try and sway me with her muliebrity. To charm a horny young man into giving her a big fat tip. She was baiting the hook and dangling it in front of me. It might have worked on the other man seated at the table. But me, I knew her playbook. I'd STOLEN things I liked from that playbook. I couldn't fault her for it, but I wanted her gone as soon as possible. Paying her as little focus as I could, I looked down at the menu. Once I picked something, she'd have to shift her attention.

And then she used my last name.

It was enough for me to lose my cool. I barely used my last name, and hearing it reminded me of the night Daddy had dragged me here. She had just been a bit overbearing at first, but now she'd actually become an irritant. I wanted to snarl at her. To bite her butt and chase her off. And then I looked past her cleavage and over at my date. Kristoph had dressed up for me. He'd promised to pay for this meal. And he'd been patient with me before. I wanted to make this a night he'd be happy to remember. And that meant I didn't make a big scene.

Folding the menu shut, I looked up at her and went with an old standby. "Well, I think I might have a soup and salad." There were always soup and salad options at places like this. "Can I hear what the soup of the day is?"

My date started to order again, but she laughed it off. I was about to say something, but thankfully Kristoph did first. A growl from behind her caused the lady to finally rear around to him to take his order. Soon after, she beat a hasty retreat from the snarling husky, but not before mentioning the dance floor and the live entertainment. I perked my ears up at that. Formal dance lessons were one of the few parts of my upbringing I'd really enjoyed. Country Club mixers, fancy company dinners, large parties... Daddy had expected me to learn steps to various dances to keep up appearances. It had been very fun, even if I'd started fantasizing about dancing with the guys instead of the girls midway through my teens.

Kristoph watched her leave, eyes narrowed as she fled. "That was really rude of her."

I was about to agree, when I thought twice. I wasn't honestly sure I'd have done any different in her situation. She was just trying to earn a buck, and I'd been there before. Taking pity on the waitress, I decided to help save her tip. "I wouldn't really be too harsh with her. It wasn't you."

"No?" I could hear the confusion in his voice. He'd misread what had gone on entirely.

Turning back to lock eyes with his baby blues, I nodded back. "She was my waitress the last time I came here."

He paused for a moment. "What do you mean by that?"

The conversation was drifting dangerously close to darker waters I didn't want to dip a toe into. "I'd... really rather talk about something else, puppy." I was desperate not to have to elaborate. Thankfully, Kristoph changed the subject, and forgot all about the waitress he'd been wronged by. The big sweet doggy managed to steer us out of the danger zone. While we made small talk and sipped on complimentary sparkling water, I watched him as he smiled. When he was in a good mood, his whole face showed it: His eyes shone in the candlelight. His ears perked up. His smile lit up the room. It was fun to watch his body language as he spoke. He'd fidget with things on the table. He'd drum his fingers or shake his paw for emphasis. He was a very animated speaker, that dog.

"...I mean, before you got here, I was practically torturing myself."

The word "Torture" was enough to shake me out of my reverie. "Wait, what?" I had been taking a sip of sparkling water when I heard it, and it went straight down my windpipe. A few coughs later, I regained my poise and appraised Kristoph. "Why would you do that to yourself over a dinner date?"

The husky's response was silence. At first. I coughed again, working the last drops of water out of my throat. He finally spoke up. "Because of a few words certain people said." "Because I felt like I didn't deserve you." I almost interrupted, but he kept going. "Because you're someone cultured and good at reaching out to people and dress really well and could date almost anyone and..."

It was obvious what was happening. As he continued, I pushed my chair out and stood up. Very soon, my paw was on his shoulder. "Come on."

"W-woah!" His eyes were as wide as dinner plates as I loomed over him. "Teri, where are we going? We just ordered our meals!" My paw was clasped against his. I tugged him, gently but with purpose, to stand up.

I tried to look confident as I turned back to him, but the truth was I had NO IDEA what was doing. I just wanted to show him he was the one I wanted. Still, I managed to sound confident.

"We're going dancing."