

## **Part 14: A Night to Remember: Finale**

I could smell Teri's scent as he pressed himself against me. His paws were wrapped against mine, as he smiled up at me. The band's music filled my ears. The rapid beat of the drums matched my pulse. I was feeling myself getting hot. The couples around us were staring at us, I just knew it. "Teri... d-don't you think this is a bit too close?"

"You have to be close when you're dancing, silly pup." He chuckled.

I swallowed. "But... I don't know how to dance!"

The tiger put a finger to my lips. "That's why I'm here, Kristoph." His finger traced through my face-fuzz down to my chin. "Well, not that I need an excuse to press myself into your manly embrace..." With a wink and a smirk, he pulled his finger away and pointed down with it. "Now watch my footpaws. I'm going to show you the steps for a waltz."

"But I'll-" My ears were flat against my head. Everyone was going to be staring at me... I was going to look so dumb. The other people on the floor danced so nicely. They knew what they were doing. I could hardly believe some of them were my age.

Teri's eyes glinted. "Don't worry about sucking at it. Everyone sucks at first when they try something new. It's not an excuse not to try."

With a defeated sigh, I turned down, and heard him rumble in pleasure. "Good puppy! Now then..." He let go of my hands. "Hands at your side, legs parallel with each other... now first you put your left paw forward, then your right... watch how I match your movements." I shuffled my body in compliance with the tiger's directions as he showed me how to dance.

His green eyes glinted in the darkened atmosphere of the dance floor as he watched me. "Good! Now that's a basic box step. Congratulations. You know how to dance. You are officially CULTURED." He bowed. "Now, may I have this dance, good sir?" And then he offered me his paw

I found myself suppressing a snicker. "Oh, is THAT how it works?!? That's how you become cultured?" Reaching out, I took his paw in mine.

"Unless you're a cheese or a bacteria, yes." The tiger smiled, as he pulled me close. "Now just do what I taught you, over and over again, in time with me." He smelled like cherries and sweat. "Once you're used to how I move, we can get a bit more creative."

And so we danced.

While we were hardly graceful at first- I stepped on his footpaw, he tripped me up with his tail, there was something warm and blissful about it. Holding him close to me, I felt my worries and anxieties melting away. Everything was right with him in my arms.

Midway through a box step, he pulled me close and clung to me, looking up. "Do you want to know WHY I'm teaching you to dance?"

"Because..." I tried to choose my words carefully. "...you... want to teach me to be as good as you?"

I chose poorly. Teri snorted and stopped dancing, glaring at me with his hands on his hips.

"Wrong answer?" I had no idea what to say.

"Kristoph..." He reached over to hug me, and then started guiding me into dancing with him again. "The only thing I want to TEACH YOU is to relax a bit." He pushed his arms up around my body, holding me close. I could feel my bulge rubbing against his waist. "I was born into someone else's money. Until my last few years I've never earned anything I was given." He ran a paw along my chin. "I'm not 'out of your league' or 'better than you' or anything of the sort. Don't be so quick to put me on a pedestal."

"I..." A weak smile grew along my muzzle. "I didn't even realize I was doing that. You're pretty wise."

The tiger rested his head against my shoulder. My heart began to race. "I'm asked you out because I want YOU, puppy." He squeezed me against him as we danced in the dark, pressed up against each other. I could smell the scent of his shampoo. Strawberry. He knew I liked fruity guys. I could hear our hearts both racing, as we swayed back and forth. Waltzing along the dance floor. I tuned out the other dancers. For a few fleeting moments, there was just the warmth between the two of us. Nothing else existed but the music, the lights, and the two of us, dancing for eternity.

For the first time that night, I felt like I could really relax.

He rested his head on his shoulder. I could hear him purring, his eyes closed, as he cuddled his body into me. "Everything you are, Kristoph, is what you've earned. This muscular body... your grades at school... your compassionate nature, your friends, your family..." He looked up at me. The lights from above were reflecting in his eyes. "For a long amount of my life, I had everything handed to me. And when I fell out of favor, I learned that almost none of it had really been mine in the first place." I felt him squeezing my muscles, a sleepy sigh escaping. "In some senses, you make me feel like I've got so much farther to go."

I froze, turning what he just said over in my head. I had no idea how to respond to that.

"Puppy, what's wrong? Why'd you stop?!?" Teri looked up at me, tail lashing in irritation. "I was enjoying dancing with you."

The crack of static jolted me out of my own head. An intercom system cut through the music. *"Table 13, your order is at your table. That's Table 13."*

"Oh." Teri's muzzle curled into a distinct scowl. "That's us, isn't it? Is that why you stopped? You saw the waitress or something?"

I nodded. "Y-yeah, 'or something'." Actually, I'd stopped because I was just dimly starting to realize how similar Teri and I were in at least one way. We both had our feelings of inadequacy. We both struggled to keep afloat on our own. I'd seen Teri at his darkest, sure. The night he drank himself into a stupor... but I thought he'd just been overwhelmed by his father visiting him. I thought it was a one time thing.

Once again, I'd done it: I'd built something, or in this case, someone, up in my head. I'd seen Teri as being this prize, this thing I didn't deserve but wanted anyway. And then, just like when I'd seen him at his lowest, this tiger snapped me out of it.

Once again, Teri had become a real person to me, and not just some ideal to pursue.

Our food was resting at the table. A white soup and bright green salad for Teri, and a steaming steak for me. My mouth was watering as the scents of the potatoes and the seared meat hit it. Returning to my seat, Teri sitting opposite to me, I started cutting the steak up. "Something on your mind, puppy?" His voice snapped me out of a food-driven reverie. Looking up into his deep brown eyes, I took a bite of steak, and swallowed.

"Well, I was just thinking about what you said on the dance floor." Teri wasn't better than me. And I wasn't better than him. We both came from different walks of life, but we both carried our own anxieties. Was that going to be a problem? Were those demons that tormented us both going to ruin any real relationship we might start?

Teri rested his head on his front paws. "And?" He was prompting me to elaborate.

Scratching the back of my head, I chickened out. "I'm... still thinking about it, to be honest." Did I like Teri only because I'd seen his confidence as unshakable? That it took the appearance of the person who took everything from him to ruin his day? Were our mutual problems going to drive us both to misery? Wouldn't it be better for both of us to be with someone more stable? Or was I just over-analyzing things and making mountains out of molehills? "Can we talk about something else for a bit?"

The tiger's brow furrowed. "Well, I suppose..." He returned to smiling. "So did I tell you the

nickname I came up for Xavier this morning? When he heard it he spit out his orange juice! I know I shouldn't always tease him, but it's how we get along. You see, I was trying to come up with another black and white themed nickname, when-" Teri kept on making small talk. Filling in the gaps of silence. Which was something I found myself appreciating. It helped me feel less awkward when I didn't have anything to say.

We dined by candlelight, making small talk over lettuce leaves and slices of steak. I told him about my family, and he told me about growing up with his father. We complained about our class workloads to each other, and got into a pissing contest about who had more on their academic plate. At the same time, we cleaned our own plates of food, beverage glasses filling up each time the waitress, whatever her name was, passed by. I barely noticed her.

Eventually, the bill came. He and I both reached for it, before pulling our paws back.

Teri broke down into a titter. My ears flat, I looked at him. "What's... so funny?"

He waved a paw at me, either dismissively or reassuringly. I couldn't tell. "It's nothing bad!" He chuckled again. "I'm just... drunk on this feeling, I guess?"

My smile bent into a frown. The last thing I wanted to see was that tiger drinking again. "What do you mean by that?"

"I'm not like this." He patted his chest. "I'm NEVER like this. I can't ever seem to talk about my dad or my life growing up without getting depressed or angry or... or SOMETHING negative." he smiled. "I keep secrets. I bottle everything up. Except tonight." He laughed again, his tail twitching like a snake. "Something about you just puts me at ease. When we were dancing, the whole world just felt right with me." He handed the folded black check billfold up to our waitress, who pranced away with it.

"I... kinda felt like that too." I smiled weakly up at him. In that moment, with a laugh, Teri had wiped all my fears and anxieties away. "You bring out the best in me." I realized it the same moment I said it. What I hadn't realized, at least not in time, was that that sneaky feline had paid the check! I'd gotten so caught up in my own head I hadn't noticed him grabbing it and tucking a card inside. By the time we got it back, I decided to just let it go.

Teri gave me a warm smile. "Well, yeah. That's what the best relationships do, puppy." He giggled, tucking his credit card back in his pants pocket and standing up. "Two or more people bringing out the best traits in each other." He walked over to my side of the table. "At least that's how I've always felt it's supposed to work. Be my big strong puppy escort and walk me outside?"

With a chuckle, I stood up, taking his arm in mine, and walked outside with him.

Bringing out our best traits, and helping each other overcome the worst... Was that a relationship? I never thought of it like that.

The stars shown in the night sky as the cool night air hit us on the way out the door. Teri had leaned up against me, snuggling into me while we walked. "Mmm... I love taller guys..." He purred, his tail whipping behind us. I stopped us at the stoop in front of the parking lot. "Hm?" Teri's ears perked as he looked up into my eyes. "Something on your mind, puppy?" I swallowed. It was now or never. I turned him so we were facing each other, holding him in my arms. Dipping him slightly and holding him there so he could tell what was going on, I leaned down.

We kissed under the approving twinkle of the stars.

A few moments later, we both came up for air. "Um, er..." I swallowed. "So do you, uh, wanna..."

Teri grinned like the cat that ate the canary. "So, your place or mine?"

I was kinda glad he said it so I didn't have to. "Are you really asking me which bedroom in our shared apartment we have sex in?" I was snarking at him.

The feline snickered. "You're right. Silly question. We shag in both of them."

"What?!?" I blinked. He'd doubled down on my sarcasm!

Stroking my chest, he purred, lifting himself up on tip toe to whisper into my right ear. "Puppy, prepare for A Night To Remember."

*And that was how the two of us got together.*

*A tale that bounced up and down with the intensity of a roller coaster. A tale of love and lust and conflict and coming out. A story that ended in a sweet, quiet whisper, followed by a, um... very intense bang.*

*But it wasn't an ending.*

*It was a beginning.*

*A beginning of us. A beginning of the struggles and trials we would face together as a couple.*

*Which started with a certain squirrel and his secret...*

**Courtship: Continue to Part 2**