

3 - The Ball

setting: Tuliyoall, after 7.3

Kiran stared at the engraved invitation in his hand with distaste and looked over at Kydani.

"We have to go to this, don't we?"

She nodded. "It's diplomatic. We have to show up, but we don't have to stay for the entire night."

He gave her a plaintive look.

"You can get all dressed up and have everyone swoon over you," she continued coaxingly. "And there will be food."

He flapped the invitation against his hand a couple of times, then pointed at her with it.

"Fine. Since you mentioned food, I guess I can live with it."

She chuckled at him and started thinking about what to wear.

They didn't talk much about the upcoming ball in the coming weeks. It was a function like many others Kydani had attended, and Kiran had warmed to the idea but wasn't enthusiastic. There was no question that they would attend together. If nothing else, they could share their suffering as they engaged in people watching and waiting for the evening to end. Neither knew what the other was wearing. The surprise might make the evening more fun.

As honored guests, they'd have rooms in the palace for the night, which would make getting ready easier in addition to saving them the trek back across the city after. On the day of the ball, they made their way to the palace in companionable silence. Their outfits had been sent ahead, so they only needed to present themselves. Once they arrived, they were shown to their rooms in the guest wing. They'd been placed conveniently across the hall from one another. After confirming what time they planned to go down to the ball, they retreated to their rooms to dress.

Some time later, a quiet knock sounded on Kydani's door.

"Ky? Are you ready or do you need some more time?"

"A moment," she called, taking a final look at herself in the mirror to make sure everything was in place before crossing to her door.

Kiran began to say something as she opened the door, but whatever he intended to say tapered off.

Kydani wore a black sleeveless sort of tunic that came almost to her knees in the front and to her ankles along the back and sides. A wealth of silver embroidery accented the tunic - enough to shimmer in the candlelight without looking overdone. Slits to either side of the front showed a length of her thighs that he quite approved. Slender silver chains connected sleek shorts under the tunic to sheer black leggings with embroidered edges. Rather than slippers she wore black suede boots embroidered to carry on the pattern of the tunic. The outfit was finished with silver wraps around her forearms and a silver filigree circlet.

Kiran realized he was staring as she gave him a small, self-conscious smile and twirled.

"Do I pass muster?"

His breath caught for a moment. Smiling softly at her, he replied, "you look like a warrior queen."

She blushed charmingly. "You look pretty fantastic yourself."

He also wore a sleeveless tunic, cream and deep wine slashed diagonally by a sash with copper embroidery. It came to his waist in the front, while the back hung in a tail to his calves. Below the tunic, loose black trousers tucked into black boots with gold metalwork. Intricately worked bracers accented his forearms. The colors set off his creamy skin and red hair while the lack of sleeves showed his arms off nicely...very nicely.

He offered his elbow with a teasing smile. "My lady, let's go make people stare."

Taking his elbow, she looked up at him enquiringly. "Dare I ask?"

Kiran laughed. "No mischief planned on my part. I never know about you, though." He chuckled as she gave him a playful smack with her free hand. "I meant that we're easily the most spectacular pair here."

She shook her head, smiling wryly. "You are...very sure of yourself."

He grinned at her, and they lapsed into silence as they entered the event room and were announced. The two made a couple of rounds, talking to people they knew and being introduced to people they didn't. Kiran had been right; they did attract quite a lot of attention from the entire room. He could feel the tension in Kydani's body and stayed close to her, his hand resting lightly on the small of her back. She flashed him a quick smile of appreciation and gradually relaxed, feeling silly that she could attend military meetings and special councils and save the world but quailed under the admiring stares of strangers.

As they finished their second round of the room, Kiran announced, "I see the snacks!" He grabbed Kydani's hand and dragged her along to the first of the refreshments tables.

"One plate at a time," she muttered to him, giggling.

"You can't make me!" he replied impishly, "or not without making a scene."

"Maybe not, but I can take it out of your hide tomorrow." She smiled at him sweetly, her eyes promising pure mischief.

Kiran sighed theatrically. "Fine, but I am making multiple trips."

"Absolutely acceptable," she agreed as she reached for a plate of her own.

Plates filled and champagne flutes acquired, they found an out of the way table. Kydani took her first good look at the room pressed into service as a ballroom. The dark stone walls were covered with banners and bright flowers. Sconces and extra braziers brightened the area, though it remained dim enough to be called cozy. Chairs and tables had been tucked into alcoves along the walls to provide quiet places to eat and talk. It would never be called grand, but it was festive.

They compared their snacks and chose items from each other's plates to share. She'd missed the chocolate covered strawberries and ate some of his. He hadn't had room on his plate for the mini tacos and ate hers instead. He laughed at her indignant look and got her another plate with more mini tacos and her own strawberries. They sipped their drinks and watched the other attendees, enjoying each other's company and their quiet spot.

After they finished their drinks, Kiran stood and held a hand out to her with a challenging grin. "Shall we dance, my lady?"

She took his hand and stood. "You can dance?"

"Honestly, not a lot, but I can steer us around the floor in something simple like a waltz."

"Well then, lead on."

Kiran guided her to the edge of the dance area and turned toward her, his other hand coming to rest on her back as she raised hers to his shoulder. They slipped easily into the steps of the dance, gliding around the ballroom and attracting yet more stares. Kiran felt Kydani begin to tense up again and squeezed her hand.

"Just concentrate on me and the dance steps."

She glanced up and nodded, fixing her gaze on his brilliantly blue eyes. She'd always thought they were beautiful. He smiled at her reassuringly. Kydani's cheeks warmed as she suddenly registered how close he was and how nice the muscles of his shoulder felt under her hand. Sure, they were close to each other sometimes in meetings or combat, but it was not at all the same. There was not this intense awareness of him as a person.

Kiran was not doing much better, though he hoped he was not being obvious. He enjoyed sneaking looks at the pretty Miqu'te when she didn't notice it. He didn't know how he'd missed that she was so stunning. Her eyes sparkled and her golden skin glowed under the warm lighting. This close, he realized how small she was - not quite up to his chin. He fought the urge to pull her closer and wrap her against him in his arms. That would be quite the spectacle. She'd kill him. She probably had a hidden knife on her right now that she'd use to do it.

And so they danced, her gracefully and him better than either of them expected. They took breaks, ate more, drank much more, danced with each other and with other people, but mostly with each other. She taught him a few more dances. He became daring and added in some twirls and a dip that left them both breathless. Before they realized it, "we don't have to stay long" turned into the wee hours of the morning.

They returned to their rooms, laughing and chatting amiably about the evening, the other guests, a million unimportant topics. Kiran gave Kydani one last twirl at her door, prompting another round of giggles from her. He smiled, then reached out with his free hand to touch her hair, letting his hand drift down to her cheek. Kydani smiled back at him, her thick lashes shadowing her eyes as she tilted her face into his hand. He took a deep breath and began to lean in, then sighed silently. "Perhaps another time, when we're sober," he whispered. She blinked at him in confusion, and he took a long step back and bowed over her hands.

"Sweetest of dreams, my lady," he told her softly before brushing a kiss on the back of her hand. He looked up and held her gaze a moment longer before turning to cross the hall to his room.

Kydani stared in shock, the hand he'd kissed going to the cheek he'd touched. She went into her own room and leaned back against the door. Had Kiran almost kissed her? Had she wanted him to? She smiled to herself, touching her hand to her cheek again and enjoying the slight tingle she still felt. Kydani hummed one of the songs they'd danced to as she practically floated across her room and changed for bed. She quickly fell asleep, still smiling with her cheek pillowed against her hand.

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