

Dancing Around the Truth

Hadrian

Hadrian strode the wide, airy halls of the Kystan palace with purpose, keeping a swift pace despite the exhaustion that weighed on his shoulders. If he slowed down, or even if he looked anything less than busy, someone was bound to pull him aside to translate some inane conversation or relay instructions to the visiting servants.

He truly loved his work, but there were times—like the cusp of a royal wedding—when he wished he weren't quite so needed. Being at the beck and call of the queen and her many royal guests meant that Hadrian had little time for his research, and even less to devote to the silly bet that he had made Freddy.

Thankfully, Mariel had turned out to be a quick study. She was eager to learn, and once they had gotten past the rough patches at the beginning of their lessons, she was making quick progress.

So quick, in fact, that he had very quickly stopped thinking about their time together as yet another commitment on his already overly-full schedule, and instead looked forward to the lessons that turned into spirited debates or deep conversations on everything from philosophy to social customs to the ridiculousness of current fashions. Mariel's eyes had a certain sparkle to them that he had come to recognize meant a challenge was coming his way, and thinking about the way her cheeks would flush when she found a topic that she felt particularly passionate about made his heart beat just a little faster. He only wished he could make her hold her ground just as stubbornly when it came to her simpering, annoying cousin. Naia grated on his nerves on her best days, but the way she tended to treat Mariel made him want to throw insults at her in every language he knew.

He had never claimed to have a pleasant temperament.

The sound of music and Mariel's bright, sparkling laughter floated through the air as he turned down the stretch of hall that led to his study. Freddy's booming, gregarious voice joined hers, the two sounds twisting together into the kind of infectious joy that usually made Hadrian look for an escape route.

A wry smile pulled at his lips as he shook his head. He had been friends with Freddy long enough to know there was no real point in trying to escape the prince's sunshine. He smiled and charmed and had a habit of worming his way into the hearts of even the staunchest grump. The only person who didn't love the prince was, ironically, the woman Freddy was going to marry.

Mariel laughed again, and Hadrian's steps slowed as the entirely unwelcome thought repeated itself in the back of his mind:

Everyone loved Freddy.

Did that include Mariel?

They certainly had been spending quite a bit of time together, and despite the fact that Mariel insisted that she didn't want to marry him, how much of that was born out of her deep-seated desire to please combined with the knowledge that her cousin Naia very much did want to marry the prince?

He approached the open door to his study with what felt like a heavy rock in his stomach. The music grew louder—one of his favorite waltzes, he noted dispassionately—and through the door he caught sight of Mariel's skirts as Freddy spun her through the room. He deflated, leaning against the frame, taking in the sight before him.

Freddy was holding Mariel in his arms, oozing princely charm as he beamed down at her and leaned in to say something that was lost under the music. Mariel's answering giggle was adorable, and the way she threw her head back, cheeks pink from the exercise and her eyes bright with happiness, to look up at his best friend fanned to life the hot, bitter flames of jealousy in his chest.

Hadrian crossed his arms in front of his chest, resisting the urge to cross the room and pull Mariel away.

He swallowed thickly before raising his voice to be heard over the music, "Hard at work here, I see."

Mariel jumped away from Freddy like a child caught stealing sweets, providing further confirmation to his fears.

"We were." Freddy, completely unbothered, winked at Mariel. "I have a wedding ball coming up, and Mariel admitted that she didn't know how to dance."

He's too good to be disloyal to Eliza, but that doesn't mean his smiles are harmless. He could break her heart without even meaning to.

He pushed away from the door. "And you thought you were the person to go about teaching her?"

Hadrian was rarely possessive about anything other than his favorite books, but he suddenly found himself firmly grasping hold of the idea that Mariel belonged in no other arms but his.

The prince shrugged. "You weren't around."

"And now I am. If I may?"

Freddy stepped back, finally putting a more respectable distance between himself and the gorgeous creature they had found on the shore. "Be my guest. I'll get the music started again." He flashed Hadrian an impish smile that suggested he knew exactly what sort of dark thoughts were going through his mind.

Hadrian had half a mind to call him out, but as soon as his fingers wrapped around Mariel's own, soft and warm, and her other hand rested on his upper arm, he lost all coherent thought. He put a hand on her back, pulling her just a little closer as the music started.

He moved automatically through the steps, lost in the moment, in the feeling of her in his arms, of her wide brown eyes looking at him with a kind of breathless wonder that made him want to ignore the music and kiss her senseless.

"I didn't know you danced," she whispered, and he could hear the tremor in her voice that suggested that perhaps she was just as affected by his closeness as he was.

A warm thrum of satisfaction bloomed in his chest.

Maybe she's not as gone for Freddy as I feared.

"Mhmm. And much better than Freddy." He couldn't resist the subtle dig. "The man has two left feet."

Mariel's eyes widened in the adorable way that they did whenever she heard a new figure of speech, and she turned her head, trying to catch sight of the prince. He smiled. "It's an idiom."

"Oh, right." She looked back at him, stumbling just a little as she missed a step. "So, what does it really mean?"

"It means he's not the first person I would pick to teach someone to dance."

"And you are?" The sparkle of challenge was in her eyes again, and it did funny things to his brain.

He smirked, dipped her, then pulled her back up so that she fell just a little closer against his chest than before. "What do you think?"

She swallowed and blinked, but didn't answer. Hadrian let the question linger in the air, choosing instead to focus on just the music and the dance and the feeling of Mariel—beautiful, intelligent, and far sweeter and more patient with him than anything he deserved.

The dance ended all too soon, and he dipped her one last time, holding out the movement as long as he could. Mariel's eyes were glued to his, and the energy between them felt bright and electric.

Freddy burst into a round of applause, ruining the magic of the moment. Mariel pulled away, pressing the back of her hands to her red cheeks.

"Expertly done, Hadrian!" his best friend cheered, giving him a small bow. "I conceded that you were in the right."

"I generally am," he answered automatically, throwing a wink to Mariel in reference to their previous conversation. Needing something to do to take his mind off her, he walked over to

his desk and pretended to sort through the papers there, then pulled some blank sheets of paper from the top drawer.

He walked back to the door, patting Freddy's shoulder as he passed. "You should come with me." *And leave Mariel alone.* "Your mother wants to send some notices of your nuptials to our foreign allies who couldn't make it, and I think it would be wise for you to give your input."

"Alrighty then, lead the way." Freddy fell into step beside him, agreeing much more easily than Hadrian had expected.

He stopped, unable to resist looking at Mariel one last time. "Don't stay up too late, Mariel. Remember, we're taking our walk earlier in the morning so that she can commandeer the rest of your day."

She blinked at him with that adorable confusion again.

"She's taking you shopping." The corners of his mouth pulled into a fond, amused smile. "Sleep well."

With that, he forced himself to follow Freddy into the hallway. For the first time in his life, the work that beckoned him was less enticing than the idea of spending time with a woman.

Which meant it was time to acknowledge the truth that had been slowly creeping up on him.

I want to win that bet...but even that will be meaningless if I can't win her heart.