

TO DANCE INTO THE NIGHT

by ellerean

for tsukemin

I'm doing this for Jill, Haar told himself, again.

There was something to be said for this new reign of Daein. The ballroom at Daein Keep looked mostly the same, at first glance, but he noticed the little touches no one else would. Most of the guests would've been mere children, anyway, last time Haar had been forced into this space. It was the same black marble floor and red velvet curtains, but the room had *life*. The sconces had been cleaned, powered by magic rather than oil; the wainscoting shone a brighter shade of black. The music was a nice touch, a small group of musicians in a far corner, plucking and banging away at things that made people dance. There certainly hadn't been *laguz* in the ballroom in his day, mingled among beorc who looked happy to see them.

It didn't change the fact he was suffocating in the high collar of his formal dress, but... it was for Jill.

The Liberation Day Ball was *her* thing, anyway. *She'd* been the one to enlist again after the Mad King's War; his name had been tacked to the invitation as a formality, despite how much Queen Daein might protest otherwise. So he'd made friends with the bartender, who'd topped his glass of bourbon again. He'd found a cozy spot by the wall, nodding to anyone who bothered to acknowledge the old veteran missing an eye.

He'd lost track of Jill. She had lots of friends now, and was better at keeping them than he was. Her pale blue gown shouldn't have been hard to miss, but there were so many colors—*that* was a nice change of pace, too—and they blended together in their

twirling and dancing, in conversation and laughter. Haar wondered how early was *too* early to leave a party. The sun had set long ago, so no one would blame him for ducking out for some well-deserved sleep.

Except maybe Jill.

“Captain Haar?”

He didn’t recognize the girl who approached. She was military, all right—her formal dress was more modern and fit a little better, if undecorated. She looked younger than Jill, with a hardened expression that told of things she hadn’t wanted to see.

“Yes?”

Her posture relaxed, if slightly. “I thought it might be you. My name is Alise. I serve under General Fiona.”

“Fiona finally got that promotion? About time.”

Queen Micaiah had offered him the same, after the war. Perhaps it had been rude to laugh at the newly-coronated queen.

“I’ve heard much about the Fizzart platoon,” Alise went on. “It’s an honor to meet one of his men.”

The fabled platoon, Haar thought, a relic of history.

“You got lucky, then,” Haar replied. “Seems I’m the last of us still kicking. But General Shiharam’s daughter is somewhere around here, too.”

Alise’s eyes brightened. “Lady Jill is here? I would love to meet her.”

“I could arrange that,” he said. “She’s my wife.”

It gave Haar a good enough reason to push off the wall. It gave him a reason to return another empty glass to the bartender with a silent salute, which got a smirk out of Alise. He didn’t much like the way she held his elbow, even if the crowd was dense; he rubbed a thumb over the back of his gold wedding band, as if he needed the reminder. Because sometimes he *did*, seeing Jill in those gowns with her hair styled by two attendants. Sometimes he still anticipated Shiharam’s wrath when she lay beside him, in that manor too big for the two of them.

He spotted Jill's red hair first in its loops and braids, then the crisscrossed ribbons on the back of a blue gown. It hadn't taken long to find her, because Jill didn't fit in a place like this, living in some manor. Jill was a *soldier*, a girl with dirt under her nails who hadn't owned a dress before, who could hold liquor with the best of them.

“There she is,” he said.

“She’s beautiful,” Alise breathed, and Haar smiled, because she was right.

He didn’t know much about magic. But maybe this was how it worked, as Jill turned around, the sudden warmth when she waved over the pressing crowd. She hardly excused herself as she pushed through them, hiking up her full skirt to quicken her pace. They’d been at the ball long enough that strands of hair had come loose, curling free around her face; she smiled wider as they met, standing so close as to bump his boot with a fancy slipper.

“Jill,” he said, “I’d like you to meet—”

“Thank you, Alise.” Jill looped an arm through his. “I’m glad we could finally meet.”

Alise's decorum slipped at once, concealing a smirk behind a white-gloved hand.

"Forgive me, Captain."

The faroff musicians started another number, one he was certain they'd played earlier in the night. It stretched over the ballroom, murmuring as the crowd shifted, in the exchange of dance partners or the polite retreat. Haar blinked slowly, as Alise offered a slight bow before following suit.

"You set me up," he said, when Alise disappeared.

"Oh, Captain Haar, you're so *brave*." Jill laughed, squeezing his arm. "Dance with me."

He liked her ungloved hand on his shoulder, that slight pressure when she pulled him close. He liked even more the curve of her waist in the cinched gown, and how comfortably his hand settled there. When she linked their hands he was glad he hadn't bothered with the old formal gloves, her palm still rough from wielding an axe.

He leaned close, mouth to her ear. "You could have just *asked* me, you know."

"Be serious, Haar." His name was a breath of a whisper. "When have you ever wanted to dance?"

Her bodice was all silks and ribbons, smooth under the hand that slid to her back, feeling the muscle beneath. Dance had not been part of their training, but he knew enough to take the lead, following the pulse of the music. He inhaled the scented oils in Jill's hair, the faint sweat under those silks, the twinge of a shared bourbon from the start of the evening.

"Besides," Jill whispered, "aren't you ready to get out of here?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Are you *using me* to get out of your party?"

“*My* party? I can’t stand it here another minute.” She fluidly followed his steps, forward and back, forward again. “I might kill the next bloated duke who asks me to dance.”

“Let me handle it.” He smiled against her cheek. “That might tarnish your new social status.”

His gaze drifted over her shoulder, to the other dancers along a velvet backdrop, to the distant bartender, popping the cork of another bottle of wine. He hadn’t noticed when one song transitioned into the next, with Jill’s hand roaming over his shoulder, playing at the silver insignia at his collar.

“Seems a waste of a nice guest room to spend the night in here,” he offered.

Jill leaned back, just far enough to peer up at him. “What are you suggesting, Captain?”

“Me?” Haar shrugged. “You know me.”

She didn’t seem so out of place guiding him off the dance floor, head held high. They detoured around the bar for a bottle of bourbon, the bartender returning a silent salute. And maybe it wasn’t too early to leave a party after all, with the moon high over Daein Keep, with Lady Jill on his arm.