

## AT THE BALL

Eliska didn't belong at the ball. She nervously ran her fingers over her gown's boned bodice encrusted with silver embroidery and garnished with white sapphires. The line of lesser guests in which she was trapped crept toward the colonnaded entrance to the palace ballroom. She was now close enough to catch glimpses of the nobility on the dance floor.

*Where is he?* she wondered. Eliska resisted the urge to make another desperate search.

Those nearest Eliska initially examined her quizzically. They whispered inquiries amongst themselves as to her identity, but no one recognized her. When no one arrived to accompany her they eyed Eliska critically. An unescorted young miss attending a royal ball was unprecedented and indecent. Then as Eliska was about to enter the ballroom alone, they looked upon her with disdain.

"Sorry. Sorry," huffed and puffed Lord Tondha as he slipped into line beside Eliska. He straightened his white wig, adjusted his lapis blue coat, and plumped his ruffled jabot.

The awaiting guests smiled knowingly. The girl was just another of Lord Tondha's beautiful young accessories.

Eliska slipped her hand into her arranged escort's offered elbow.

"You look irresistible," he whispered into her ear.

*I should think so*, Eliska thought. *It took the better half of the day to prepare me.* She was adorned in a wine-red gown, silver fillagree choker, and long satin gloves. Her sable hair had been elaborately twisted and curled atop her head.

Eliska's heart thudded when they paused in the ballroom entrance. Crystal chandeliers glittered with candlelight. Wall murals came alive with gold embellishments. Dancers in jewel-colored silks and velvets swirled with panache to music originating from the gallery above.

Eliska took a deep breath. She considered all those depending on her and stretched tall. The liveried footman positioned at the entrance struck the floor with a gold-capped wooden staff.

"Lord Tondha and Guest!"

People turned in amusement to observe Lord Tondha with his latest companion. The rotund, gouty lord's wealth attracted a cavalcade of beauties.

"Where does he find them?" whispered one grand dame.

"She *is* a beauty," commented her uniformed partner.

Eliska scanned the ballroom. Queen Otká sat alone on the dais as King Kestmirr was once again confined to his bed. Handsome Prince Rezyk was easy to locate by the gaggle of females collected around him.

Lord Tondha made a circuit of the ballroom to greet and be greeted. Eliska overheard snippets of conversations as they progressed.

"They say the King will not recover this time."

"Prince Rezyk requires no regent now he's reached his majority."

"No joy for Count Layza. All his maneuverings to rule from behind the throne have been for naught."

"Rezyk on the throne will bring an end to the Vozshnykin raiders."

King Kestmirr had been on his deathbed so many times his actual passing would come as a relief. Count Layza of Zhlynnya had been designated regent for the two princes after inveigling his way into the confidence of the king and queen. But Prince Reznyk was now eighteen and made no secret of his disdain for his father's advisors. Count Layza's circle of influence was reduced to Queen Otka and six-year-old Prince Hollyk. Yet much respected and well-liked Count Dusann had already won the younger prince's trust and admiration.

Lord Tondha was absorbed in conversation when Eliska looked about to discover a pair of ice blue eyes scrutinizing her.

"May I rescue your companion, Tondha?" interrupted Count Layza. Lord Tondha bowed in acquiescence.

Count Layza swept Eliska onto the dance floor. She had been well drilled in the steps and skimmed lightly across the floor with the man who had arranged her attendance at the ball.

"You're doing quite well," said Layza. "He's already noticed you."

As they approached the flock of chattering women surrounding the prince, Count Layza twirled Eliska close by. Eliska glanced over her shoulder to find Prince Reznyk watching her. She blushed and dropped her gaze. Count Layza spun her nearby a second time for good measure before whirling across the dance floor.

Prince Reznyk caught up with them just as the music ended. Count Layza made the introductions and relinquished Eliska to Prince Reznyk. Her breath caught as his arm wrapped around her waist. Eliska melted into the dazzling young man's embrace, her pulse quickening as he swung her onto the dance floor.

"Why have I not seen you before?"

Prince Rezyk peppered Eliska with questions as they danced. Her vague responses were sufficient to intrigue and enthrall the prince.

When the music ended Prince Rezyk retained possession of Eliska to immediately dance with her a second time. The ballroom buzzed with speculation about the mystery girl. Queen Otko demanded to know the identity of Lord Tondha's young miss. The parents of marriageable daughters grumbled.

Eliska curtsied at the conclusion of the second dance and issued a breathless "Thank you."

"You need fresh air and refreshment. We'll go to the terrace."

Eliska looked about with concern.

"Just ignore everyone," said Rezyk. "Their opinions are nothing."

Eliska's hand trembled in Rezyk's clasp as he guided her from the ballroom.

The Prince snatched two glasses of wine from a silver platter wielded by a mustachioed footman. They proceeded to the terrace balustrade to admire the stars and the full moon. Those already on the terrace gawked at the pair before retreating to provide the prince his privacy. His personal guard, clad in evening attire for the ball, kept a respectful distance.

Rezyk hungrily studied Eliska in the moonlight. She shivered under his examination.

"You shall return to the palace tomorrow and we will go for a ride and then lunch in the garden."

"Would that I could," said Eliska. "But I depart for home tonight."

"Tonight!"

Rezyk splashed wine when he set aside his glass to pull Eliska's closer. Her heart fluttered at his proximity.

“My mother and brother need me,” Eliska explained.

“They can wait a day or two. You shall return home in my own carriage pulled by the fastest horses in the royal stables.”

“Your offer is tempting. But I cannot.” Eliska set aside her wine. She noted the prince’s guards had been removed.

“You refuse?” Reznyk was truly taken aback. “Must I convince you to comply?”

“Just so.”

Eliska snatched the stiletto hidden within the embroidery and boning of her bodice to thrust it between Reznyk’s ribs as Layza’s assassin had taught her. The prince stared at her without comprehension. Eliska tamped down the bile that rose in response to her act. Reznyk sank to the brickwork to collapse at her feet. Eliska dismissed a twinge of guilt. A swift death was more than the king’s men granted her father who only wanted to feed his family. She gazed at Reznyk until he gurgled his last breath.

Eliska turned away to find Count Layza leaning against one of the terrace doorways. She went to him.

“Well done,” Layza told her.

“My mother?”

“Lenka has been released. She is already on her way to Visgynya and Clan Morvya.”

His confidence in her unquestioned compliance repulsed Eliska.

“And Antonynn?” she asked.

“Your brother and his Vozshnykin raiders will not be hunted as long as they remain in the Visgynya Mountains.”

“So you have what you wanted. Headstrong Prince Reznyk is dead. Queen Otka will lean on you once King Kestmirr is dead. And you will rule as regent for Prince Hollyk.”

“King Kestmirr is already dead.” Layza smiled. “Something he drank.”

“Ah,” Eliska nodded. “A near perfect evening for us both.”

“Only *near*?” asked Layza with an arched eyebrow.

Eliska shoved the bloody stiletto she still held into the count’s chest. His icy eyes widened in surprise. He staggered backward into the mustachioed footman who caught the count under his arms. Eliska stooped to pick up Layza’s feet and the two of them moved his limp body out of the doorway.

“*Now* it is perfect,” Eliska told the dying Count. “Your word isn’t worth cow manure. This assures Count Dusann will become regent for Prince Hollyk. Clan Morvya can trust Dusann to uphold any treaty he signs.”

“C’mon.” The footman grasped Eliska’s arm to pull her away. “The horses are this way. The others will be waiting for us.”

“I hardly recognized you with that thing on your face.”

“I can’t wait to remove it,” said Antonynn.

Eliska glanced at the two bodies on the terrace. Maybe now the mountain clans will have an opportunity to thrive without the brutal domination of the Crown.

Antonynn tugged on Eliska who struggled to keep up with him. “Hurry, Lisky! How many damned petticoats are you wearing under that gown?”

“Too many. At least the gown doesn’t show the blood.”

“Layza thought of everything.”

“*Almost* everything.”