

This whole debacle was Cyril's fault. He claimed that if I hadn't been so gloomy and depressed about not going to the ball, then none of this mess would've happened. I could hardly be faulted for wanting to attend, as I told him again and again. The ball was a once in a lifetime opportunity for me. As the daughter of a lord I have the right to attend, entering society and thereby possibly securing a husband for myself. My stepmother didn't agree. Ever since the death of my father when I was eight, I had lived as a peasant in her house, under the heel of my stepsisters and her ladyship. So it was inevitable that I would be denied the chance to even catch a glimpse of the palace. My twin had no intention of going whether he was invited or not. He wasn't exactly interested in ladies or luxury.

Nobody seemed willing to help me, or even sympathize with me in any way. That would explain why I was so surprised when Cyril, the worst apprentice in all of the magician's collage, pressed a pair of glass slippers into my arms, claiming they were magic.

"What?" I cried indignantly, trying to shove the slippers back at him. Cyril looked offended.

"Don't you go turning up your nose at my hard work, miss." He said waving a finger in my face. "Those are your ticket into the ball." I stared at his smug expression.

"How?"

"Put them on." Of course the slippers instantly clothed me in the most beautiful gown I'd ever seen. The dainty slippers fitted to my feet like they'd always been there. Cyril had surpassed all my expectations for him, and I told him so, which made him blush. He told me not to let anyone else see them. When I asked him why he replied with a grimace, "I don't want people to know I can do this when I try," I laughed and thanked him again.

Going to the ball was a nice change. It was a masquerade which I suppose, for the courtiers, was a romantic notion. Being able to find the ones you love without really knowing who anyone is means that you're meant to be, or something like that. Only I didn't know anyone, and it was unlikely I'd ever meet any of these people again. Instead I was hoping to see the sights, or maybe dance a little, and then return home by midnight so that my stepfamily didn't return to find me gone.

I kept to a pillar in the corner and watched. Nobles were dancing and chatting, no doubt already having found friends. Suddenly I felt very out of place in the middle of all this splendor, and it made me a little angry. This should be my world! I should be enjoying myself now!

Instead all I wanted was to go home. I began to turn from the hall, already anticipating Mikhail's "I told you so," when I returned to my twin's donkey cart and begged him to take me back home. My departure was cut short, when a cultured voice called out to me.

"You're not leaving already, are you?" A masculine voice asked. I turned to the pillar that had been my companion for the last few moments. A face poked around the opposite side of it. A deep purple mask with elegant silver moons covered the man's features. All that could be made out of his face was a pair of deep, blue eyes and his friendly smile. "Well are you?" he repeated. I blushed and answered.

"No, I was just...um going to find something to drink," I lied hastily. The stranger laughed and came around the pillar, standing next to me and gazing out at the crowd.

"Good, I'd hate to be the only one on the outside of this," He said waving a hand at the courtiers. I looked out at them and wondered why we were the only two on the outside. "I'm Alek," He told me smiling again.

"Elizaveta," I replied, "Why are you out here with me? I at least have a good reason,"

"Oh and what is that?" He asked, quirking an eyebrow at me.

"I'm visiting the court with my step-sisters," I lied again. "I don't know anyone here, so I couldn't be a part of that if I wanted to. You on the other hand don't look like a country noble," I said regarding the rich fabric of his coat, "There are plenty of ladies to dance with, why are you here hiding like a child?" My new friend chuckled.

"I see why you stay out of the party, not many would appreciate a tongue as sharp as yours. I've known you not ten minutes and you're already correcting my behavior," I blushed deep scarlet. The man sobered slightly, "As for me, you are right. I am hiding. You see, ladies have never been my strong suit, I much prefer companions to suitors," Alek sighed.

"Is that really such a problem for you?" I asked in alarm. Alek nodded ruefully, and I giggled at the look of comic depression on his face. He smiled at me and I was delighted. I was so glad to have made a friend and from his smile I believe Alek was too.

"My lady, may I have the honor of your hand for the next dance?" He asked extending an arm to me. I mocked hesitation.

"Are you sure the other ladies would allow it? You are quite sought after I should think," I said jokingly. He gave me a care-free smile.

"If they come for me, you can protect me with your tongue, Veta," He said easily.

“Touché, Alek, touché,” and I took his hand.

At the stroke of midnight I received a shock, I would only have a half hour to return home before my stepfamily. If they returned to find me gone, I was dead. I hurriedly said goodbye to my partner and ran for the door. I tumbled down the stairs, but caught myself. It was only when I was halfway home, in the little donkey cart driven by my twin, that I realized my finery and one of the slippers were gone.

It was two days later when I heard about the prince's search for the mysterious girl that left behind the single glass slipper. A royal announcement appeared on the message board in the town square proclaiming that the prince was searching for “whomever the slipper fit, so that he might marry that person.” I was shocked at the realization that Alek was Prince Alekzander and that I was the mysterious lady, but when I thought about it it began to make sense. There had been a rumor that the Prince was being forced to marry by his parents, but you never know what stories to take seriously in the royal city. I'd never have guessed that it was true, and that I would've been the girl.

As expected, the whole city was turned on its ear with the news. Girls were everywhere talking about how they might have a chance to marry the prince. I mean let's be honest; it wasn't a very difficult test. There were probably hundreds of girls in the city that had the same size foot. The prince would already be married by the time I ever saw that slipper again.

“The slipper will only fit you,” Cyril said after I told him about the announcement jokingly.

“What? Why?” I was genuinely surprised. Magic had that effect on me, I always expected it to have a very limited use, but it always stretched so much farther.

“I'm not quite sure about the magical theory,” Cyril said adjusting his glasses, “but I mixed a lot of older spells together to achieve the proper outcome. One of them had a personal component that should bind the slippers to you specifically. At least I believe that's what the text meant,” He trailed off. “Do you really want to marry the prince, then?” He asked suddenly. I thought about it for a moment. I had every right and chance to, but would I?

“I guess I do, in a way,” I said thoughtfully, “I mean every girl wants to imagine they're special and that people will notice it. Every girl wants to think that some great romance will change her life, but I don't know that I want to be with him forever. In any case, can you imagine my step-mother's face if I married the price when he could've had one of her 'precious little

angels” I said imitating my stepmother’s simpering voice. Cyril didn’t laugh, which was unlike him, and we parted soon after.

Apparently Cyril was right, because in the week that followed, the prince continued to try every foot of every maiden in the royal city. A rumor had begun that a witch had cursed the slipper and that it made sure that his majesty would never claim his true love. Cyril seemed entirely too smug about this, but at the same time, his spirits seemed to sink with each failure.

“I just don’t get why he’s only checking the girls,” Mikhail complained. I handed my brother the tool that he was searching for, rolling my eyes where he couldn’t see me.

“I’m really trying not to be offended by that, Mikhail,” I said testily. Mikhail was already elbow deep in some weird contraption that would revolutionize life, just like the last one was meant to.

“Oh come on, I’m not saying you look like a guy, I’m just saying that it’s unfair of him to assume,” He said without looking up.

“Yes, Mikhail, because SO many guys dress up as women and flirt with the prince,” sarcasm dripped from my tone, earning me a snort.

“I’m just saying it could happen. I wouldn’t limit myself that way,”

“Of course not,” Sometimes I wondered why I talked to my twin. The door of the study opened, cutting off what was probably a scathing retort.

“Elizaveta,” the servant called, “Madam says you are wanted in the kitchen,” I stood up from the work bench calling a goodbye to my twin, who didn’t dignify my exit with a response. I let myself into the small kitchen and looked around. Everything was in perfect order since I’d finished my chores that morning, and my stepmother was nowhere in sight.

I turned to the door to leave, but the knob didn’t rotate at all. Wonderful, someone was playing tricks and I wasn’t sure who, not that it was hard to guess. I turned back to the kitchen and spied the only window. Even when fully opened, there was no way that I could squeeze through. I tried to call for someone to let me out, but no one came. I resigned myself once again to be at the mercy of someone else’s wants.

Out the window the wind blew through the trees and mocked me. A carriage rumbled up the drive. All the pieces clicked. This wasn’t any random carriage, only a royal carriage would set my stepmother in this state of panic. I was a threat to her. For a second I basked in this information. There is a sort of praise in knowing that your enemy feels the same way toward

you. That moment was of course short lived, because I knew that I still couldn't leave. I was after all still trapped. In a desperate attempt to not be beaten I tried pushing myself through the incredibly small window, and called for help.

In a distant part of the house I heard the doors being thrown wide. No one seemed to hear me. I was yelling my throat raw and no one thought to question it? I gave up on the window and tried the door again. Still locked. I beat on it furiously. That was my chance to leave and get away from this miserable, stupid life. My chance, but it was fading fast.

"Veta, is that you?" A muffled voice reached through the door. Mikhail was on the other side.

"She locked me in!" I yelled hurriedly. "Mikhail, she locked me in and the prince is here. That's my slipper, and I'm stuck here!"

"Hush, listen I'll see what I can do to stop them," He whispered through the door, "I know the housekeep keeps a second key somewhere in the kitchen. Try to find that, and I'll stall them." His footsteps ran hurriedly from the door and I tore off around the kitchen. I flung cupboards wide and looked through all the drawers. Out in the house I heard a crash, and vaguely wondered if Mikhail had unleashed one of his monstrous machines on the household. It took a good amount of time, me tearing around the kitchen, before I found the key tucked in an upper corner above a cabinet.

I opened the lock without another thought and rushed out into the hall. I tore through the manor off in the direction of the foyer. The voices grew louder and louder. I was late I was so last, and I would miss my chance. I smashed through the door at last, in time to see the glass slipper slide effortlessly onto my brother's foot.

All hell broke loose.