The dark winter days are drawing in and despite the continuous stream of letters from dukes, earls and barons begging for more of her town's timber and the 'excuse' this gives the ladies of the court to cosy up to the king, Lady Georgiana Howard is glad for at least one reason - the cold, cool winds always manage to keep her migraines at bay. And because she gets to wear her favourite velvet cloak. But with the arrival of some mysterious court visitors and a series of crimes that manage to rock the kingdom to its very core, will Georgie and her friends manage to make it through the bitter season? Will they manage to defeat the monsters that lie dormant within themselves? And will they learn to blossom in the way their roses are prophesied to, even when it comes to matters of the heart?
Prologue

As per usual, here's some basic information concerning the world and characters of this story before we get started!
- I'll be updating this story every Sunday at around 10:30 AM GMT and every Wednesday at 5:45 PM GMT
- I don't own The Chronicles of Narnia, or Caspian - that really would be the dream, but oh well...
- This story takes place a couple of years after the events from The Voyage of the Dawn Treader film
- Our heroine, Georgie, looks something like the picture (https://i.pinimg.com/originals/4a/cd/e5/4acde5a2d0095e2d3a6d8417b502fc02.png) and the face-claim I'm using for her is Natalie Dormer from The Tudors (because I'm firmly adamant on the fact that she has brown hair)
- There will be some swearing going on and some suggestive (I can't believe I'm even writing this...) kind-of content as well as some general violence but I'll put a warning at the start of the particular chapter if it's anything serious
- I created a Spotify playlist for this story (open.spotify.com/user/abicxx/playlist/2NlrrcPlg7xlY3n0DRppVd?si=w0Aof_yeRimzc3AY1wRYKQ) which includes songs that fit the characters, the themes of the story, songs that I think characters would like and songs that would fit the Modern AU that I'm creating in my head because that's just what I do (there's one particular song on the playlist that I know is 100% Modern! Georgie's favourite song ever) so please check that out!
- I've also created some story and character aesthetics that you can see over on my Pinterest (www.pinterest.co.uk/abi_cxx/story-aesthetics/) which I'm constantly adding to so if there's any side characters that you'd like to see, or any particular themes or AUs that you'd like to see, please tell me because I really enjoyed making them
- All my links can be found on my profile, including my new Tumblr so if you have any questions, queries or just general thoughts please go ahead and let me know!
- I'd love it if you could also, for purely selfish reasons, think about what Hogwarts houses you think the characters would best fit into and let me know. I have my own ideas for each character but I'd love to see what you think!
- Lastly, thank you so much for reading and I hope you enjoy this as much as I did creating all the characters and generally just swooning over the person that is Ben Barnes...
Chapter 1

Lady Georgiana Howard

The cold stone of the window frame cooled my skin as I pressed my forehead against it, looking out through open window as I peered out on the town below. The air was fresh and cleansing on my face as I breathed in the smell of smoke from the bakers' ovens and blacksmiths' forges, the sweetness from the jams and chutneys that were sold in the market. I could feel the gradual ebbing away of yesterday's migraine with each deep breath that I took, the deep pain at the front of my skull slowly beginning to fade.

It had better stay away for today. I couldn't afford to be the only person to have ever thrown up inside the smooth, grey walls of the chapel.

For starters, I had something of a family name to uphold. And secondly, enough people already underestimated me and considered me a swooning mess on account of the dresses I wore and the way I sometimes had to spend hours tucked up in bed with the curtains closed on account of my migraines.

Down in the town square the clock began to chime, the ricocheting noise making the pounding in my head intensify for a moment as I squeezed my eyes closed.

I'd dressed myself that morning in a gown of mostly white lace with a burnt orange bodice and beads embellishing the hem and cuffs having slowly stumbled around in the semi-darkness to find all of my clothes, hair products and accessories already out and ready to be used. That was what Lysa had been doing yesterday evening after dinner when she'd been shuffling around in my chamber as I had struggled to grasp any sleep. She'd probably presumed I was still gripped by my migraine and had left me to sleep for a little while longer before waking me.

I turned at the sound of noise coming from the corridor outside my chamber, the quiet murmuring of two voices. As I stepped closer, I managed to pick out exactly who the owners' of the voices were and felt myself smirk a little, despite the motion causing a ripple of pain in my head.

"A princess shouldn't have to carry her own washing around." Tristan teased and I was sure this had to be the fourth time he'd used this line in the last week. If Lysa had picked up on this, which I felt sure she had, she didn't comment on it.

"Luckily for you, I'm not a princess." Lysa replied, her voice clear and light.

"You are to me." Only Tristan could make a line so clichéd sound personal and well thought out as opposed to obnoxiously irritating. I'd often said to him that he should become a ballad writer, considering the romantic lines he usually poured into Lysa's ears. I knew that whenever he said them in public, Lysa would get embarrassed and get annoyed with him but as soon as they were away from the crowds, she'd admit that she secretly liked them. It was sweet and simple, which was exactly the way I would have advised anyone to win Lysa's heart.

I pulled open the door and raised an eyebrow as they quickly pulled away from each other, one of Tristan's hands still sitting on Lysa's waist as the other tangled itself into her red curly hair that she had pushed back with a woven hair band.

"Morning!" Lysa smiled, playfully pushing Tristan away from her and rolling up the sleeves of her navy cotton dress. "Are you feeling better?"
"Much better."

"That's a shame,' Tristan smirked as he adjusted the collar of his dove grey tunic. 'We could have all done with something to liven up the service."

"I'm glad my suffering amuses you so."

"I'll go and fetch your breakfast in a moment, now I know that you're awake." Lysa continued. "And this letter came for you. From Lord Bayard?"

I took the letter from her pale hands and tore the seal open using my nail on the spot, as I stepped backwards to allow them both to enter. Most ladies would probably be skeptical about letting a manservant into their chamber - I could name a couple that would certainly have an issue with it - but I'd known Tristan ever since I'd known Lysa and knew that he was harmless, if somewhat exasperating with his wit.

He also happened to be Caspian's - that was the king's - manservant and told me on many occasions that the king was an erratic sleeper: some days he'd be up before dawn while other days he slept in until he had to pry him from his sheets. Today, seemed to be one of the latter days even if it was an official ceremony day where the whole court would be in attendance.

As Lysa began opening up the remainder of my curtains and complaining about the chill in the air that I'd let in because of the open window, I carefully unfolded the letter as I sat down on the edge of my bed. I'd been anticipating the letter for days now but at the same time praying that I'd never receive it. I knew I would though, because it seemed some people really didn't know when to just leave it be.

Lord Bayard was becoming increasingly agitated over 'his' timber shipment and had basically put down the threat to invade Wedgemore if we didn't give him a larger quantity. He didn't seem to realise the offer that we were making him and seemed to think that he could continue to ask for more and more and there would be absolutely no consequences.

In comparison to his kingdom, Wedgemore was tiny and barely more than speck on a map of his relatively large collection of towns, farmland and forest and because of that, there was an element of not wanting to turn him down because I knew what kind of destruction a force like Bayard could inflict on us if he wanted. But I also knew that we couldn't appear to be weak and to bend to the whims of any opposition that was put before us. I'd been contemplating the matter for some weeks now and I wasn't much closer to a conclusion.

"Have you seen Markus this morning?" I asked Tristan as he re-arranged the goblets and water jug that was positioned on my dining table.

"The last time I saw him was last night where he happened to be playing a game of cards with some soldiers and they were betting over a bottle of wine."

I rolled my eyes and let out a sigh as Tristan returned to organising my furnishings. I could practically predict how that game of cards would have ended, or not as the case probably went, and how the rest of the night progressed but I was hoping that even he would have more sense than to drink himself silly before such a prestigious event.

"I'm going to have to go and look for him." I said, pushing myself to my feet. Look for him was synonymous with wake him up but neither Lysa or Tristan reminded me of this. The ceremony was due to start in just over an hour and while Lysa was diligent and a hardworking perfectionist, Markus had to share a manservant with two other lords and if he didn't look to be stirring, he'd be left to sleep
in his own sweat.

"What about your breakfast?" Lysa asked with furrowed brows, the laundry basket at her feet as she folded some of my old nightgowns into it.

"When I find him and am confident he won't disgrace himself too badly, I'll come back for it."

I didn't really have to go and find him, per se. I knew exactly where he'd be.

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I rapped on the door again and waited for a moment. Still no answer. I mentally groaned and reached for one of my hairpins. I should have bet money on this happening.

Checking down the corridor that it was still empty, I sunk to my knees in front of the door lock. While I wasn't sure I would be arrested for breaking into the chamber of my own brother, I knew it wouldn't look particularly dignified to any passing servant or noble.

After a few moments of struggling, the door clicked open and I hurriedly stormed in. The curtains were still wide open, I doubted they had been his number one priority when he'd staggered back to his room in the small hours of the morning, and several chairs had been knocked over. I sighed, pulled the one closest to me back upright. When Markus was drunk, he went drunk hard. That included bumping into furniture and having no recollection of the night before.

He didn't actually look to bad as I approached the bed. He was still dressed in his clothes from yesterday, his boots carelessly lying in the floor. At least he wasn't covered in blood like that time he'd gotten into a brawl and then conveniently forgotten about it.

"Markus." I reached for his shoulder and started shaking him, soon taking to tapping his face as well as that didn't seem to work. "Markus. You need to wake up. Markus!"

"What's happening?" He groaned, flailing out at me as he rolled onto his side. "What time is it?"

"Time you got up." I caught a whiff of his breath and pulled a face. He definitely needed to brush his teeth. I wasn't sure whether he'd be allowed into the chapel smelling like that, never mind be blessed by the spirit. "Don't make me go and find Lucille to drag you out - " I threatened when he didn't move for a moment. If he fell asleep on me, I was seriously going to consider slapping him.

"That's the last thing I need," He moaned, flipping onto his back and rubbing at his eyes.

"Exactly." I offered him my hand so he could pull himself into a sitting position and I was glad to see there were no dark bruises circling his jaw. "I'll go and find you some food and you'd better be dressed by the time I get back."

"When do I not listen to you, Georgie?" I shot him a glare as I left the room, shutting the door on my way out. I did not need some poor servant to be mentally scared when they unwittingly walked up on Markus scrambling around the room in an attempt to dress himself.

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We narrowly made it to the chapel on time and I'd had to physically drag Markus out of his room or he probably would have fallen asleep in his chair. He was wearing some fresh clothes and had promised me he'd brushed his hair but he still carried the aura of someone who'd been for a swim in the moat.

I cautiously watched him walk over to a pew at the far side of the chapel, a handful of lords waving him over. At least he could walk in a straight line without falling over. That was one achievement.
The chapel itself was a grand, imposing building of grey stone, columns of marble interspersed down the aisles to hold up the high ceiling. Today, the columns were decorated with bunting made of green leaves and pure white flowers picked from the castle gardens. The whole building seemed to shine with a bright, white light aided by the large windows covering two of the walls and the tapers that shone with burning candles.

I remained by the doorway for a moment, scanning the pews that were already filled with bodies. Even in chapel there was a unspoken hierarchy - the king and his most important advisors and nobles sat at the front and the rest of the court trickled behind, with the servants sitting on benches on the very outskirts.

I knew who I was looking for, however. She was always on time for everything as I scanned the pews in the center of the room holding many of the captains and generals of the army and navy, I spotted the tumbling blonde hair that had been elegantly pulled back into a bun and her pale, pale skin that always seemed to shine inside the chapel. On more than one occasion I'd joked about her being half-Angel.

"Morning." I murmured to her, dragging her from wherever her thoughts had dined to take her as she looked up and smiled, shuffling along the pew to let me sit beside her. She was dressed in a flowing lilac gown embroidered with flowers and as she picked up her skirts to allow me to sit down I noticed a soldier sitting further down the pew - I felt certain he was a junior deputy in the navy - watching her closely. It seemed she had another admirer to add to her ever growing list.

I knew that I shouldn't really be sitting next to Karinna at all, given that she was the daughter of the highest ranking general in the army, but the pair of us always glared at any noble who dared call me out on it.

"Good morning." Her voice was low and hushed, primed that way after years of attending services like this and being scolded whenever she was deemed too loud, too obstructive, too much. She barely ever raised her voice now but she didn't need to - her words could cut like steel when she wielded them purposefully enough. "Any news?"

"Bayard is threatening to invade." I said stiffly, my eyes carefully watching the people sat around us. I didn't want to be saying any of this around his supporters. Karinna's eyes grew wide for a moment before her expression became considered.

"What? I didn't know things were that severe - "

"It's what he's implying," I answered, looking out over the pews to find where Markus was sat quietly laughing along with his group of nobleman friends, before turning back to face her.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to sit through this service and pray that Markus doesn't make a complete fool of himself. Or me. He still stinks of mead. I'm just hoping Annalie doesn't judge someone's goodness off the way they smell or we might be in trouble." A flicker of a smirk passed over Karinna's face, her hazel eyes lighting up with amusement before a priest at the front of the chapel loudly cleared his voice and a sudden wave of silence washed over the congregation, as though stifling their voices.
Chapter 2

Lady Georgiana Howard

The Rose Hallows ceremony began with a series of hymns, prayers and sermons before each member of the court, including servants and visiting dignitaries, were given a single rose that had been blessed by the High Priestess Annalie which would represent and reflect our state of mind, our position in life and what the coming year would bring for us.

If it lasted that long. Some people's roses didn't make it through the week, never mind the year, but that probably had more to do with the fact that they forgot to water them.

The ceremony was a recent addition to the court calendar, recent as in the last four years, in an attempt to redefine the rule of the Telmarine and Narnian king. The nobles and scholars who'd suggested it had recommended its religious history, its symbolic nature, the way it would bring the whole court together in unity to celebrate the year passed and the year yet to come.

The idea of the ceremony was much more appealing than the actual ceremony itself. In its entirety, it took just over three hours to complete the necessary hymns, prayers and sermons as well as deliver out each rose and by the end, everyone was just ready for a chance to eat something, stretch their legs and speak something that isn't in verse.

The event also brought on huge social judgement from the court, clearly going against the basic morals of the ceremony but that didn't stop them, as if the rose someone was given was a reflection of their oncoming demise.

Karinna's rose was tall and white, with proud leaves still clinging to the stem while mine was a bright cherry red with full petals and hints of pink. I'd made careful note of the rose Markus had received when he had stepped up to the alter and it was surely ironic and fitting that his rose looked to be drooping, the colour a pale and somewhat washed out yellow. It would have been amusing, seeing as he still looked half asleep, if I now didn't need to worry about him for the coming year in case he too started to droop.

Some of the nobles didn't take the ceremony half as seriously as I did; in fact quite a few people joked about how we were listening to flowers, how it was a load of religious nonsense and was just another way for the Church to control our lives. These protestors were mostly ignored, however, as the ruling nobles saw the ceremony as a chance to remind people of the new morals we were supposed to be living our lives by.

I had never really questioned it, having been brought up by my parents to attend chapel every week and even now those beliefs were firmly instilled inside my head. I had nothing against the religious world that some people seemed to nor was I prejudiced towards those who chose religion as their occupation. Annalie, the High Priestess, was a lovely person and that had nothing to do with the religious circlet that rested on top of her blonde hair. She was barely older than myself, at least I presumed she was as I'd never heard her talk about herself, and yet had the pressures of a kingdom weighing down on her.

Those protestors were the ones who, every year, managed to turn the ceremony into something else, something that it wasn't meant to be. The events taking place at the foot of the altar, the simple gesture of being handed a rose and a blessing, became the fountain of court gossip for months afterwards and I knew that certain figures in particular would be being watching especially closely. They knew it too. Caspian, obviously, was being watched like a hawk by practically everybody in
I hated how people were constantly watching him and judging him and evaluating his every move - whether he was weak or strong, ill or in love, unstable or was scrabbling for more power like his uncle had. This year, his rose was light pink and I could already feel the quick glances exchanged between people and the judgements that were being made about what the colour meant.

After all the roses had been given out and each person blessed, it was time for another round of sermons and prayers. I cautiously looked out over the congregation that were dutifully listening, or at least pretending to be, and caught the figure of Lucille near the back of the chapel, a blood red rose clutched in her firm grip and her almost black hair curled like a thick rope at the nape of her neck. I hadn't spoken to her in a while, it must have been weeks at this point, but I saw her dark blue eyes linger on my face for a moment before shooting back towards the priest.

I made it easy for her, really. I always sat as near to Karinna as I could possibly get and seeing that she was one of the tallest women at court so, she was fairly easy to pick out.

We completed another prayer and then waited as the priests blessed the most noble members of the court: the king, his direct advisors and his generals. I noticed Hestia, or the Duchess of Irvington if I wanted to use her full title, proudly holding her white rose in her gloved hand as a priest sprinkled a droplet of holy water over her head. Everyone was expecting her rose to be white, there probably would be some sort of outrage if it wasn't, and she knew it and this was for no other reason than her roses had all been white for the last four years since I'd arrived at court. She was watched almost as much as Caspian was - the most powerful woman in the kingdom, some said, and I believed them.

Finally, after the final prayer had been said, the priests returned to their seats around the altar and Annalie took her position in the center of them, the flowing white gown she always wore settling around her like water. I watched Caspian stand from his seat and button the blue wool coat that he was wearing before turning to address the congregation. I could feel Karinna staring at me out of the corner of my eye. I grit my teeth and nudged her gently with my elbow.

It wasn't even funny anymore, was it? Every time I laid eyes on him, I felt my chest constrict and my hands started to sweat. The worse thing was that everyone I cared about knew this too. I hated how pathetic it made me sound.

I was barely listening to what he was actually saying about the upcoming festivities for the winter and spring months and listening to the way his deep voice sounded as it echoed around the chapel. It was the same sort of things every year - balls and games and ice skating on the pond in the grounds if the weather was cold enough. But as soon as the congregation started to quietly murmur among themselves, I knew that I had missed something.

"We're playing host to some exciting guests." Karinna whispered to me, knowing that I would have missed his words. I raised an eyebrow.

"Who?"

"From Lakosia, so everyone calls them - "

"The Lakosians." I finished, "Imaginative."

"They're renowned for being solitary and isolationist in their policies." Karinna explained quietly. All propriety seemed to have been lost because no one was giving a shit about being quiet now. "They hardly ever engage with foreign nations. I'm not really sure what would make them come here - we don't have the beautiful weather that they do."
"Maybe it's the people." I said and saw Karinna roll her eyes.

The oak doors leading to the chapel suddenly flew open and everybody turned their heads to see a non-descript guard shuffle awkwardly under our gaze, his hand clutched around the sword at his belt. That took guts - to be able to storm into the chapel during the Rose Hallows without a declaration of war or a marriage proposal in his hand. But clearly his presence meant something to Caspian because he took off down the aisle, almost at a run, and his advisors scrambled after him. We could barely bow our heads fast enough as he hurried past us.

"Looks like they're here." I murmured and with Karinna clutching onto my wrist, I began to edge my way through the crowds and out of the chapel, spilling into the corridor. I took a moment to catch my breath, Karinna tucking a loose lock of blonde hair behind her ear, as we surveyed the scene in front of us.

"They certainly move quickly." Karinna whispered and I felt myself nodding.

There had to be at least one hundred of them, but there seemed to be more as they stood in perfect formations down the corridor, their jewels shining off the pale morning sun that was shining through the windows. Each one of them seemed tall and possessing an elegance I'd only ever truly seen in people like Karinna, people who had grown up under the gaze of the crown and had been groomed since birth to form the perfect diplomat. Each one of them was dressed in finery that could have taken hours, if not days, to produce. I was distinctly jealous.

It wasn't difficult to identify whom their leader was.

She must have a little younger than Lucille, her skin flawless and clear like porcelain but with the warm glow of somebody used to fine weather and good food. She stood tall, despite her relatively medium stature, wearing a gown of deepest red and purple velvet, embroidered with gold flowers and silver beading across the low neckline and flowing cuffs. Her hair was the colour of roasting chestnuts, warm brown with flecks of gold and as her deep green eyes flickered over us, I got the distinct impression of being in the presence of someone whose subjects would never dare cross her, in fear of the consequences.

I liked her. I wasn't entirely sure why, she'd done nothing but look over me as I bowed my head in respect, but I liked her.

I also liked the delicate emerald necklace she was wearing; the diamonds, pearls and emeralds looked dazzling in the light and I noticed a few of the navy generals, those that were brave enough to do so anyway, paying particular attention to the way the rope of pearls disappeared into her cleavage.

I wanted to tell them to be careful. This was a woman who was not to be crossed.

Caspian had dropped to one knee in front of her, gently kissing the hand she stretched out to him, and as he rose I could see the wide, yet firm, smile he reserved for all diplomatic guests. His expression seemed different this time, however. It seemed even a king could be won over with some spectacular window dressing.

I spotted Markus lurking on the outskirts of the crowd of Narnians, one hand gripping onto the wall beside him. I narrowed my eyes at his pasty, pallid complexion and the way he was swallowing deeply with his eyes lingering on the floor.

Caspian was talking to her, Hestia at his shoulder, her hand still lightly clasped in his from where he'd kissed her and not yet let go. I would have felt a surge of jealousy, and then perhaps a surge of reverence because who wouldn't be captivated by her, if Markus hadn't then pushed through the
crowds, a hand clutched to his stomach, and vomited at her feet, his sickly green bile splattering all over her golden shoes and the hem of her velvet gown.

- What do you think so far? Of Georgie? Of Markus and Karinna? And where do you think the plot is going to go?
I felt like I was going to be sick.

I couldn't... He hadn't...

Oh, shit.

One of the Lakosian guards had dragged his mistress away but there was no way of avoiding the vomit that had already covered her shoes and gown. Her face had turned pale, her eyes glaring down on Markus as he violently started coughing and dry heaving. I heard someone behind me - it was either Lady Parsons or Lady Moreso - let out a shriek, as though they were the ones being attacked with bile. Caspian was fervently apologising to her, offering her his arm and his promises to pay for the damage. Hestia, on the other hand, was rooted to the spot and if looks could kill, Markus would have been buried minutes ago.

We might not be one of the old, established court families but we'd been around long enough for people to be able to recognise our faces. There were some lords standing on my right who definitely wanted to kill Markus and then me right now. But it wasn't just them I had to be afraid of. Hestia, or Caspian, or even the Lakosian queen could behead me right now if they wanted to.

I couldn't speak; I couldn't respond to Karinna's wide eyes because I didn't know what to say.

The Lakosian queen was looking down on Markus, his face worringly pale as his dry heaving continued, as though he was some kind of sewer rat. It wasn't just her. I could feel the scathing, from all sides, bearing down on me right now.

"Lady Howard." Hestia's voice cut through me like a blade. There was no warmth there, no compassion for how sickly Markus now looked, only contempt. "I suggest you remove Lord Howard back to his chamber immediately."

"Do you want any help?" Karinna reached for my elbow but I shrugged her off.

"No." I didn't want to think about the look on her face, the expression of pure horror that I'd never seen grace her features before. I couldn't think about anything as I stormed forwards, the Lakosian queen's gaze narrowing as she laid her eyes on me.

I seized Markus by the elbow as he stood hunched over, still coughing, and started half-dragging him down the corridor. I knew my grip was fierce, my nails digging into the fabric of his coat but I didn't care. The clattering of my heels on the concrete floor sounded oppressive against the stark silence behind me, only the slightest of murmurs from the crowd dampening in it.

"Georgie, I'm sorry. Please, talk to me. Please, I'm sorry." He wheezed and we turned the corner and I quickened my pace.

"No." I didn't know what else to say. There was nothing else to say. I kept my eyes firmly on the path in front of me, glad that I didn't come across any servants or rogue nobles who hadn't been attending chapel.

Everyone had seen. Everyone who was worth anything at court had seen.
I pushed open the door to Markus' chamber and released his arm, leaving him to reach for the water jug on his dining table, clumsily pour himself a drink and take a long gulp. That was probably the first non-alcoholic drink he'd had in the last twenty-four hours.

"I suggest you take a bath and sleep it off." I said harshly, my words mirroring those Hestia had spoken mere minutes ago that I felt sure were now embedded inside my head.

"I'm sorry Georgie, really - "

"No, you're not!" I felt something inside of me snap as I looked over his pale face. "Because how you thought getting drunk the night before the Rose Hallows is something that I'll never understand."

"I made a mistake Georgie, I - "

"No shit." I turned away from him. "Now I have to go and write an angry letter back to Bayard and beg him not to invade us and somehow hope that we're not executed by dawn. You're not stupid Markus, but sometimes you can be a real idiot."

I slammed the door closed as I left, jolting slightly as I noticed Lucille waiting outside, leaning against the wall with her arms folded. She always appeared when I was least expecting it and, the majority of the time, when I least wanted her. I started walking away but she quickly caught up with me.

"Drink can turn men into fools." She said casually, as if she hadn't just seen her nephew throw up in front of the entire court and on to a visiting queen at that. "You shouldn't worry about him so much. You're not his mother."

"No, because his mother is dead." Sometimes I wondered whether she said things just to get a rise out me because surely she hadn't been oblivious to the affect that these words would have on me. Surely she hadn't forgotten the death of her own sister seven years ago. "You can't just show up and have meaningful conversations whenever you feel like it and ditch us the rest of the time for your conquests and your side-projects."

It was no real secret that Lucille had a tidy sum of money in her pocket, despite having no close family who held any substantial titles, and I knew that if we ever needed it, if Wedgemore ever needed it, I could get the extra funds from her but I'd cut off my own arm before I went to Lucille for anything.

I quickened my pace down the corridor I needed to take in order to get to my chamber and left Lucille lingering near the staircase. I wanted to return to my room and not have to think about anything but Markus' actions coupled with Lucille and Bayard had put me into a foul mood and I was hoping that that didn't bring on another migraine. I'd spent the majority of yesterday in bed with the curtains tightly drawn; I did not need that for two days in a row.

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Karinna was waiting for me when I returned to my chamber, lingering outside the door like Lucille had been and, like Lucille, she also seemed to instinctively know where I was going to be. I didn't know whether that was because I was far too predictable and needed to reshuffle my movements or whether it was because that was how well they knew me.

Without communicating, we'd both started walking and had found ourselves on one of the many balconies that looked out over the grounds and the town that could be found in the castle. In summer, they would be teeming with nobles soaking up the sun but in the colder months they were mostly vacant.
I looked down on the vast castle grounds, picking out the Lakosians as though I was picking fresh berries out of a basket. I couldn't put my finger on it but there was just something about them that made them stand out from everybody else.

At least the cool air would help to diffuse my head and clear my thoughts.

"It's surprising that I haven't been beheaded yet but I suppose it will only be a matter of time." I joked, feeling Karinna shoot me a sympathetic look.

"No one's going to behead you." She said firmly. "The King won't allow it."

"Considering how strong the Lakosian queen is, or how strong she's rumored to be, I don't think he would have much choice. She'll kill the whole Howard line in boiling oil, not that there's very many left to kill."

"Her name's Estella." Karinna said and the name fit her perfectly - beautiful, strong, intelligent. The kind of person who didn't take kindly to being vomited on, no matter how much I seemed to admire her. "You need to give yourself a break, you know. It's not fair for you to have to deal with everything."

"No." I said firmly, looking down at my hands. "What I need to do is save Wedgemore from being completely annihilated by Bayard, and then somehow manage to not get executed. And then I'll have give myself a break."
Chapter 4

Lady Georgiana Howard

Later that evening, it was announced a ball was due to be held in Queen Estella's, and the rest of the Lakosian's I supposed, honor and I felt certain this was being used as a diplomatic technique by Hestia, or indeed Caspian, in order to soothe and placate her. I'd be pissed if someone threw up in my gown as well.

But then, at the very least, I'd want to know that the person was alright.

The ball had been announced a mere four hours before it was due to start and, because of this, I'd seen nothing of Lysa or Tristan or indeed many of the servants; I presumed they were being run ragged in the kitchens in an attempt to produce enough food for the event, have enough wait staff working a late shift and have the Great Hall suitably cleaned in time.

This was something I'd rather wanted to avoid - a large gathering featuring both Narnians and Lakosians - because I knew that there would be sour feelings on both sides towards Markus and therefore myself. On the other hand, I knew the event couldn't be missed or we'd risk reducing our reputation even further for not supporting the king and his guests.

However, this meant dragging Markus from his half-drunk stupor and I didn't know how much of his condition he'd been able to sleep off. I'd avoided him all day by shutting myself in my chamber in order to respond to Bayard's, and several other, correspondences and had made a conscious effort to avoid the side of the castle where Markus' chamber was located.

I knew I was petty but I also felt justified.

If Markus pulled another stunt like he had this morning at the ball, then punishment was going to be inescapable. I wasn't sure how harshly Queen Estella liked to reprimand her subjects - he was looking at a severe telling off from Hestia and a further decreasing of his reputation and he'd probably have to write her a letter of apology - but if the stories I'd heard about her were anything to go off, he'd be lucky if she only sent a mercenary to discreetly deal with him, and then probably myself, in the middle of the night.

I also had to consider the possibility that he'd be angry with me, because that was just the kind of person he was. In some ways, his anger was worse than any punishment Hestia or Queen Estella could hand out. It was his fault for being an absolute prick and getting drunk the night before the Rose Hallows and for being sick directly on the queen, as opposed to the floor next to her.

Regardless, the ball had started over twenty minutes ago and he was yet to make an appearance but, having said that, not many other nobles had arrived yet either.

With a goblet of wine firmly in my hand and my back against a pillar because you could never be too careful, I was able to survey the hall for any subjects of interest without attracting too much attention. I spotted Tristan serving wine in one corner, a large silver tray balanced on one hand, dressed in his finest livery. They really were pulling out all the stops tonight.

And if Tristan was in attendance, that meant...

"I see you've already helped yourself to some wine." Lysa appeared at my shoulder, her unruly hair twisted into a long plait, having changed her gown into a fresh green one since I'd last seen her. She'd helped me dress in my simple navy blue gown, with a full, billowing skirt, before being
ushered back to the kitchens in order to help make some pies for tonight.

"Indeed, I have."

"Sorry for abandoning you." She said, shifting her tray of goblets onto her free hand. "We had strict orders from the King and the Duchess of Irvington and that meant a lot of running around being harassed by Matron."

"They certainly want to make a good impression." I mused, watching as a wave of Lakosians suddenly entered and immediately headed for the buffet table. At least they appeared to have their priorities in order...

"The Duchess of Irvington had all the servants try on new liveries." Lysa continued, "even when I explained that I don't technically have a livery because I'm not a member of the royal household."

"Hestia might as well run the whole country." I said, before taking a gulp of wine. I noticed that Lysa, even when talking informally, always called Hestia the Duchess of Irvington, while I often surpassed titles in favour of first names. It was yet another indicator of my distant upbringing, how Lysa had grown up living in close proximity to the castle and the monarchy and knowing that one slip of the tongue regarding someone's title, especially in the days of Miraz, could earn you a day in the stocks.

I, on the other hand, had been brought up in a world where the most complicated titles got were remembering whether someone was a Lord or a Sir.

It seemed that Hestia had influence in almost every aspect of court life - she was an advisor on the King's council, had her own land, title and property, was in charge of the King's household and her son, Julien, also happened to be the King's closest friend. I'd heard some rumours that she's specifically pushed him into being friends with the King in order to have more over proceedings. I thought this seemed a little far fetched, but even I wasn't entirely sure about the limits of her ambition.

On a bad day, Hestia could be even more terrifying and cold-hearted than Lucille. I did my best to slip under her gaze - but it was clear that, today, I'd had a spotlight shining down on me.

"They're trying to make the Lakosians feel special." I continued, as more and more people continued to trickle into the hall. Still no sign of Markus. "That way, they'll give us more gold or food or whatever we're asking from them in the trade deal we'll inevitably be making."

Karinna then entered the room, dressed in a loose-fitting white embellished gown, her hair pulled back off her face and I would have missed Markus' arrival as he slid past next to her - he was attempting to hide himself behind a group of excitedly chattering ladies - if he hadn't been so much taller than the ladies and had stuck out like a sore thumb.

I watched him take a goblet of wine from Tristan before making his way over to a group of young lords, his clothes and hair looking considerably less rumpled than I had been expecting. It seemed he'd been able to shake off enough of the night's mead to at least care a little about his appearance. That had to be reassuring.

"Aren't you going to go after him?" Lysa asked as Karinna came over to us, turning down a goblet of wine in favor of water.

"I'm not talking to him when he's in a strop." I wasn't going to waste the energy in trying because I knew it would be like hitting my head against a wall.
"He can't be mad at you, he's the one to blame for his actions." Karinna said.

"He can be mad at anyone who makes him realise he made a mistake."

"I told you, you should be enjoying yourself rather than worrying about events that you can't change."

"But I have to worry, otherwise nothing would ever get completed and Markus would already be dead in a ditch."

"I can think of one way that you'd enjoy yourself." Lysa said mischievously, her blue eyes glimmering. "And I know exactly who you want to dance with." Lysa was never usually so bold but, whenever she was, I was immediately reminded of why we were so close.

"Yes, it's Tristan." I deadpanned and I knew that if she wasn't concentrating so deeply on not dropping any of her wine goblets, she probably would have hit me. "You should be dancing too, you know, and enjoying yourself. You shouldn't have to get so mixed up in all of my problems."

"The men who find me attractive are also the men who find me - or my father - terrifying; none of them are going to be asking me to dance." When it wasn't her father's stern reputation driving men away from her, it was her apparent lack of emotion, dullness and frigidity. I knew that none of the gossip surrounding her was true but something that I learned at my time at court was that it was often difficult to change people's opinions whilst remaining dignified and this was one characteristic Karinna was intent on keeping, no matter how unhappy it made her.

We'd had many conversations about the topic and they usually included me attempting to push her in a certain direction and her firmly resisting. She was determined to continue on with her life with people almost treating her like a leper. But, I could shout until I was blue in the face, I knew that Karinna wasn't going to change her mind so the only thing I could do now was to support her decision.

"How's your rose faring?" I asked, as Lysa suddenly got called to stand at the opposite side of the hall with her tray of goblets.

"It's already doing better than last year." She said, taking a sip of her water. "But that's only because last year it started to wilt within three hours."

I'd placed my rose in a crystal vase on top of my dining table and the last time that I'd checked, it had looked exactly the same as it had done when I'd brought it out of the chapel. I'd have thought that it would have at least started to wilt a little by now, considering how frazzled I had felt afterwards.

"I'm sure that Markus' must have started to wilt by now." I said and saw Karinna roll her eyes. "And if not I'll be demanding Annalie why not."

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An hour later, the ball was in full swing and I'd even danced with a handful of lords - all the while I'd noticed Markus slowly making his way around the hall and edging closer towards where I was standing. Karinna had disappeared in search of another glass of water and I knew it was only going to be a matter of time until Markus came to talk to me.

"I'm sorry." I looked down at the goblet in my hand as I swirled the wine around and bit my lip. "I know how much this all means to you. I guess I just got too carried away. And I'm sorry that Hestia now probably hates you. Us. And Queen Estella."

"I really could hit you sometimes, you know." I said seriously after a moment, looking up at him and
"I know." He swallowed hard and ran a hand through his blonde hair, stepping aside as Karinna rejoined me, a fresh goblet in her hand. She sent me a knowing look.

"How about, to make up for things a tiny bit, I dance with you?" I rolled my eyes at this. Markus knew how much I loved dancing and that I rarely ever said no, regardless of who was asking. He might be an idiot some of the time but I trusted him with my life.

"Will you join me?" Karinna shook her head, gesturing to the goblet in her hand. That really was a poor excuse.

"But you'll be alone..." I didn't realise what Markus was even doing, until I spotted a figure making his way through the crowds, towards us. It was Julien, the Marquis of Irvington if I were being formal, and apparently, he was close with Markus. Or close enough to approach when he waved him over.

"Because that will go well." I hissed but Markus ignored me, plastering a beaming smile on his face as Julien approached. He was dressed in a bright blue tunic and velvet breeches that complimented his dark skin but, then again, everything he wore seemed to compliment him. That was probably part of his role as diplomat.

In all the time that I'd known him, I could count the number of times I'd seen him smile on one hand. He was serious and quite stern but, considering his mother was one of the most powerful people in the entire kingdom, this was probably to be expected. He didn't seem like the ideal person to bring Karinna out of her shell, regardless.

He was a diplomat, however, and surely this meant he had to be able to talk to anybody, even intelligent, somewhat closed off and occasionally infuriatingly stubborn ladies?

I let Markus take my hand and lead me into the center of the room, putting one hand around my waist and the other holding my hand. We'd been forced to pick up the court dances as quickly as physically possible because it soon became apparent that dancing was a fantastic way to build connections with people who might want to make a trade deal with us.

'So. Bayard.' Markus murmured as the music started, his lips hovering over the top of my ear as we began to move around the room. If people didn't know that he was two years older than me, they would be able to work something out based on our height difference. "I really hope that any attack will stay off at least until the Spring. I don't want to lose any of our men to hypothermia if we don't have to."

I gave Markus a hard stare as he twirled me under his arm. He shrugged innocently. Just how had he found that information out?

"Did you sneak into my chamber?" I asked incredulously and he gasped.

"As if I would ever dare such a thing." So he'd definitely done that. Good to know. "Why do you think everybody hates us?"

"Not everybody hates us." I paused for a minute as I focused on the complicated pattern our arms were supposed to be making. "Just a lot of middle-aged lords who are angry that we are younger than them and living in a small but fairly profitable town."

"What do you think about the Lakosians?" I asked, quickly changing the subject. "Why are they here? Why now?"
"What exactly are Hestia and Estella planning?" He murmured, his thoughts mirroring my own. "Hopefully an elaborate banquet and a hunt."

"Hestia? Not Caspian?" Markus, like myself, tended to call people by their first names rather than their titles. It was something else that allied us together and also divided us apart from some of the other nobles.

"She plans everything under his nose." Markus said and I frowned. Hestia might be powerful but I didn't agree with his heavy criticism of Caspian.

"I think you need to give him more credit."

"And I think you need to give her more credit. She's slippery. You think you have her all worked and suddenly she surprises you. And I don't think it's going to be a nice surprise."
Chapter 5

Lady Georgiana Howard

I released Markus' hand and curtsied deeply as the music slowed, a polite smattering of clapping replacing it as the dance ended. Markus performed a sweeping, exaggerated bow as couples began to leave the floor as new couples joined. I couldn't keep the smirk from my face as his blue eyes sparkled with humour.

"Lord Howard?" A woman appeared at Markus' side, dressed in a very beautiful purple gown and a sparkling of what looked like glitter dusting her brown cheeks. I knew she was part of the Swifton family - I felt sure father had had dealings with her brother, or was it her uncle, a long time ago - but I couldn't quite remember her first name. Flora? Constance?

"Lady Swifton." Markus greeted with a charming smile as he swept her hand up in his and lightly kissed it. "Florence." That was it. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes as she giggled slightly at the mischievous look Markus was giving her. He acted that way around nearly everyone. It was all part of his act.

"Would you do me the honor of dancing with me?"

"Certainly." Markus smiled at her again and, after winking in my direction, he began to lead her towards the center of the hall. He'd never turn anybody down, within reason of course, and I knew that, behind his jovial persona, he would be secretly glad that someone still wanted to talk to him, given his actions this morning.

Having said that, she could be doing it as part of a wager. I didn't know whether she was that kind of person; I didn't think so.

"Go and get some food!" Markus called over his shoulder. "The cakes look delicious." Because he knew that that would be my first port of call. I had a fondness for anything containing lots and lots of sugar.

I stood by to watch Markus and Florence dance for a moment, a stab of empathy shooting through me at the hopeful look on Florence's face. I certainly admired her for having the guts to ask a man to dance rather than waiting to be asked and she seemed so friendly, so graceful as Markus spun her around the room that I felt almost deceiving as I knew that Markus would never fall in love with her the way she might be hoping.

If she still liked him after his behavior towards Estella this morning it showed she wasn't a judgmental person and would have made a decent match under different circumstances.

I'd been consciously trying to keep as much distance between myself and Estella all evening, on the chance that she decided to enact some delayed form of revenge. I'd been watching her out of the corner of my eye and, so far, she'd done little other than dance with some important looking Lakosians, smile at whoever came her way and engage in deep conversation with both Hestia and Caspian.

She hadn't yet danced with Caspian, however, and this was the true reflection of how well diplomatic relations were going and how easy it was to buy her favor with impressive balls and fancy servant liveries.

I steadily made my way through the nobles crowded around the outskirts of the hall on my way to
buffet table, keeping a careful eye on Caspian, Hestia and Estella whom were all collected at the other end of the hall. Caspian looked to be engaged with some of his advisors, while Hestia offered Estella another goblet of wine, and I felt sure that he'd rather be talking about something else, seeing as this was supposed to be a ball not a business meeting - I was certain I'd just seen Robert Nadal say something about the economy.

Surprisingly, Karinna was now actually dancing with Julien and I had to give the man credit for this. Neither of them appeared to be talking very much, however, and I was sure that that particular conversation was hilarious.

The buffet table was located in parallel to where Estella was currently engaged so I reasoned that yes, I actually would go and help myself to some of the desserts, if to keep away from Estella if nothing else.

I was also getting rather puckish and I didn't want all of the best varieties to have been eaten.

I'd yet to spot Lucille throughout all of this but I knew that she would be here somewhere; balls were one of the ways that she made the most money by seducing half-drunk lords back to their chambers after being handed bags of their gold - as well as other, more conservative, methods because I was well aware that she made her money in ways that I had never even considered.

Lysa met my gaze as I approached the dessert table, having been moved off delivering wine to already half-drunk nobles. She immediately reached for a plate and began carefully cutting off portions of the various beautiful and intricately crafted cakes and desserts that were laid out over the table. I really didn't know how the bakers and confectioners did it.

"I'm guessing you want to try a little of everything." She said with a smile.

"You know me so well." I answered, adjusting the neckline of my dress a little - I didn't need to flash half the court, there had been enough scandalous behavior from the Howard family for one day, though I knew that several lords and earls would have been more than okay with that.

"Have you noticed that Queen Estella hasn't danced with the King yet?" Lysa asked slowly, her voice low. I rolled my eyes because it really was the same kind of gossip that circulated around the room, wasn't it?

"And apparently, I'm not the only one." I teased, watching as Lysa blushed slightly before shrugging.

"Do you know if Queen Estella is married?"

"I don't think so," I answered thoughtfully. "I think Karinna would have told me that. And, I don't remember having read that anywhere."

"That could be the reason behind her visit." Lysa continued. I knew that someone was going to bring this point up sooner or later and, when they did, they'd give me the same sympathetic look that Lysa was giving me now. "The King's one of the most powerful men in the whole world, " As if I needed to be reminded of that fact for the hundredth time.

"I don't think he'll marry her." I said, turning to glance at them over my shoulder.

"How do you know?" She asked, not unkindly but curiously, as she handed me my plate.

"It's just a guess." I said with a smile. "I don't know. He just doesn't seem like his type." Because I obviously knew what his type was, didn't I? "I guess I'm hoping he'd chose someone who doesn't
look at my brother like he's vermin when he's clearly not okay. Even if she's very beautiful and powerful and intelligent."

"Well, speaking of - " Lysa trailed off, a smile on her face and as I turned I felt my heart begin to drop into my stomach. He was coming over.

"He must have smelled your delicious cakes." I said with gritted teeth, watching Lysa silently work at cleaning the cake knife, a smug expression on her face. I stared down at my dress, smoothing out any of the creases, and ran my tongue over my teeth in case any of my lip paint had transferred onto them without me knowing.

"I didn't even make the cakes." Lysa said pointedly. "Mary, Edward, Clarissa and a lot of other people did. I was on pie duty, remember - "

"Good evening." God, I couldn't stand how attractive he was. It was stupid. I knew it was stupid. I still couldn't stand it. We both curtsied and as I rose, I was thankful his eyes were concentrating on the cakes on the table instead of my face. That way, he couldn't see the blush that was forcing its way onto my cheeks as I stared up at his face. He had several inches on me, no matter how hard I tried to hide it by wearing high heeled shoes. "Everything looks delicious. What would you recommend, Lady Georgiana?"

It took me a moment to realise he was talking to me and, when I did, I felt like hitting myself. I couldn't even convincingly appear to have it together anymore.

"Everything looks lovely." I said with a smile, turning my eyes back towards Lysa because at least she couldn't make me blush as furiously as I was. In my hand, I was still clutching my plate that sampled every type of dessert on offer and as Caspian leaned over slightly to pick out an elaborate chocolate and vanilla cake, I saw his eyes flicker down to my plate.

I thought I saw him smile a little but I doubted that it was in endearment; it was probably because he'd realised just what a child I was rather than because I was adorably charming.

"Has Lord Markus recovered?" So now we were having this conversation. I felt my face flush again, this time in shame. He didn't seem to be particularly angry so I figured that was some small mercy.

"He seems to have come round." I said stiffly, swallowing hard. I was considering coming out and telling him that I'd be limiting his alcohol intake from now on but thought better of it - I needed to keep up the façade that he really had been ill instead of drunk for as long as I could. "I'm tremendously sorry for any trouble or conflict it may have caused you."

"You don't need to be sorry." He said with a tight smile, drawing his eyes over to Lysa as she passed him his plate. "It was an accident. If anything, it distracted my advisors onto a topic that wasn't me for a while."

He was standing so close to me that I could feel the brush of his coat against my bare arm, smell the wood and sea salt that seemed to linger on his skin and -

I spun around at the shout of my name, my eyes locking onto a frantic-looking Markus who was half-lying half-kneeling on the floor, cradling Florence in his arms. Her eyes were closed, her face pale, her chest heaving erratically as she attempted to gasp for breath.
Chapter 6

Lord Markus Howard

Everything around me seemed to speed up - I could hear people shouting, feel people rushing past me as they pulled Florence from my grip, see the bright lights of the hall blurring before my eyes - but my own hands seemed to freeze, to halt, to have no idea as to what was happening around them.

One moment I was dancing peacefully, aware of the sly glares other nobles were giving each other as I passed, the questions undoubtedly running through their minds as to just what exactly I was doing with Lady Florence Swifton. Not all of the nobles, of course. Just the ones who looked towards me with a distasteful eye and there was enough of them to make their presence felt. Georgie never talked about them, how it wasn't just what I was doing that was a threat to our building reputation but as what I wasn't doing. What I hadn't done.

I'd been dancing and Florence had been smiling up at me and I'd been wondering whether I'd be able to swipe a piece of cake from Georgie's plate without her noticing. I'd been betting no, but seeing as she had been distracted with Caspian I reckoned my chances had increased somewhat.

That had been until I felt the grip on my hands loosen and Florence had crumpled to the floor like a shred of paper caught in the rain. Now she was convulsing and thrashing on the floor, a light spray of blood coating her lips.

Something pushed my shoulder gently and I turned to see Georgie's worried eyes scanning my face. Florence was now trying to be comforted by another woman, Caspian shouting orders around her.

My mind was racing, the panic sweeping through me as I wiped my palms across my breaches as they started to sweat. I could cope in warfare, battle strategies and positions were second nature to me now, when you could force yourself to think merely of the plans that were on the table, what was at stake, and the soldiers at your disposal were just tools for an aim rather than people. I didn't know whether that made me a monster or not, something able to flick a switch in their brain to shut off their empathy, but now, this wasn't about numbers and figures anymore.

Florence was a living, breathing woman with a family and a life. I'd felt her in my hands, the warmth of her skin, and now she was fading.

"Markus?" Georgie shook my shoulder again, the panic clear on her usually reserved face. I realised that the dull noise I'd been hearing in my ears had been her voice. "Are you okay? You need to calm down. She's going to be alright, I promise."

I felt myself nodding as Georgie leaned over and gently took Florence's wrist to check her pulse and then felt her brows. I sucked in a breath, feeling the eyes that were watching me as I silently began to fall apart. I ran a shaking hand through my hair and turned back to Florence, adjusting her head slowly and rolling her slightly onto her side. I wanted to hold her, have her head in my lap so that I would feel like I was at least doing something to help, but I knew from at least my basic medical training that if someone was coughing like she was, they needed to be on their side so they didn't choke.

Georgie was still hovering over her, running her fingers down her neck, her brows furrowed. I saw Julien push his way through the crowds from where he'd been dancing with Karinna and sprint away down the corridor, presumably on the tail of a physician.
Caspian was addressing the crowds that had quickly formed around us, reassuring them that there was nothing to be alarmed by, the situation was under control and that the physicians were on their way.

The situation didn't feel to be particularly under control, not when Florence was still coughing and grasping for breaths in between her convulsions. I knew that that was all part of leadership and not destroying the morale, but still; I never thought my basic medical training would be needed in a situation like this.

I tried to ground myself further into the situation. I wasn't helping anyone by looking around like a dazed idiot.

I realised that the woman who was trying to comfort Florence, the woman who shooed two servants away when they tried to help, was Lucille. I'd been so dazed out that I hadn't even noticed her, her face flushed and her eyes-half wild as she gently ran her hands down Florence's back and murmured something to her, something that seemed to comfort her. There was a look of slight panic on her face; she must be friends with Florence because I'd never seen her look so wild and yet act so gently towards someone.

"You're going to be okay." Georgie was murmuring it over and over again like a mantra as she took Florence's hand, ignoring the sharp look Lucille gave her, and I didn't know whether she was aiming it towards myself or Florence.

I looked up from where I was kneeling on the floor, meeting Caspian's gaze as he stood watching over us, wringing his hands. He looked how I felt - that what was unfolding was something that he couldn't control.

Florence was trying to speak, mumbling words that I couldn't quite hear before the hacking coughs continued again. Georgie had already checked her throat and the vacant yet panicked expression she was wearing revealed that nothing was currently lodged in her throat, nothing that could be an explanation for what was currently happening.

I began replaying the events in my mind, again, but this time focusing on what had happened leading up to her fall. She'd approached whilst I'd been dancing with Georgie, asked me to dance, took a final sip of her wine and -

The wine. The damn wine.

I pushed myself to my feet, my eyes scanning the room until there. She'd placed it on a side table rather than giving it to a servant which was a blessing because most of the servants had now moved away, startled by what was happening, and whatever had been left in her goblet had probably been thrown down the sink.

Father had begun to teach us the basics of toxicology shortly before his death, another skill that I never thought I'd have to use in a situation like this. Perhaps to see which tankard of mead my comrades had spiked in order to knock me out and place me in a series of unflattering positions, but nothing like this.

No one, for once, seemed to pay much attention to me as I seized the goblet from the side table, their eyes far too caught up with the action that was unfolding directly in front of them.

I briefly smelled what remained of the wine, detecting nothing that stood out to me. There had been no colour alterations with the wine wither and I could see nothing floating around in the goblet or any residue coating the sides. Some of the deadliest poisons on the planet were invisible, however,
and the only way to know would be to have someone take a sip and observe them.

Julien suddenly came running back into the room, followed by two physicians, who descended onto Florence. I saw Caspian and Julien share a look, the worry clear on both their faces.

I looked up as Georgie made her way over to me having been pushed aside by the physicians so that they could assess Florence properly. She took note of the goblet in my hand and bit her lip.

"You're thinking poison?" I shrugged, handing her the goblet.

"She was drinking something before we started dancing, but there's no colour alternations, nothing obvious to say it was tampered with." Even though Georgie had been barely 15 when father had started teaching us about toxicology, she'd picked it up as quickly as I had, perhaps even more so. But I would never tell her that.

"There's nothing I can see." She agreed and I let out a sigh, looking out into the crowds of people as Hestia was attempting to calm down the crowd by telling them they needed to let the physicians do their job, putting on the smiles and vague reassurances that she always did that Georgie and I had learned to ignore.

I focused on Estella, who was surrounded by her advisors whom were all dressed as splendidly as they had been this morning. She didn't seem to be alarmed and if it wasn't for a slight narrowing of her eyes, you wouldn't know anything had happened at all. That must be her way of appearing a stable leader - never letting on how she felt which wasn't particularly useful to anyone.

But, then again, that was how I worked too.

Maybe I should change that...

"She's probably asking if it's contagious." Georgie murmured to me as we both watched her lean over and whisper something to the advisor closest to her.

"You don't really like her, do you?" I would have been amused if the situation wasn't so dire.

"I don't mind her, she just seems to be rather apathetic." Georgie answered. "And besides, it's mutual. I'm a Howard and she probably thinks that all Howards like to vomit on her."

"Fair enough."

I turned suddenly as one of the physicians started speaking, asking for help transferring Florence up to their rooms so they could better treat and monitor her, and surged forwards towards them. That was one thing I could actually do, one method to calm the consuming sense of guilt that was building in my stomach.

Caspian and Julien also stepped forwards and, after maneuvering her body onto the stretcher, we began to slow process of carrying her. Her skin seemed to have lost all its glow and luminosity, her eyes were pale and watery. I caught her watching me, her gaze faint yet focused and I smiled at her.

"I didn't think my dancing was so poor that you needed to collapse to get out of it when you realised what a mistake you'd made."

I thought I saw her smile but that might just have been what I wanted to see.

- What do you think of Markus' character? And who do you think's responsible?
Chapter 7

Lady Georgiana Howard

I gently tugged the brush through my hair, cursing how it could manage to become so knotted in a matter of hours. I was alone because I'd given Lysa the night off, or rather I'd been forced to because after a ball there was always so much to do and tidy away, so I'd built up the fire myself and lit some candles - the soothing orange light always helped me sleep better. It was another reason why I liked winter; it was impossible to do this in summer when the heat was so stiflingly oppressive.

The ball had continued on for a couple more hours after Florence had been safely taken into the care of the physicians but it had been clear that the atmosphere had dramatically changed as soon as Florence had collapsed. The jovial, light-heartedness that everyone had been thriving off had been destroyed; we'd all been reminded of the fact that we were, in fact, mortal and no amount of wine and good food could change that for us.

Florence was now considered to be in a stable condition and had finally stopped coughing after being made to drink countless flasks of water, but she was still being monitored throughout the night just in case she suddenly took a turn for the worse.

I had been feeling fairly confident on Markus and I's poison theory but the physician were as of yet unable to find any cause of her 'fit' which is what they were referring to it as. Now, I wasn't so sure. If someone was going to go to the hassle of poisoning her, why wouldn't they ensure to give her a strong enough dose that would be enough to kill her? The fact that she was still alive was puzzling, no matter how glad I felt that she was.

That would have unearthed a whole host of problems and seeing as we now had to factor the Lakosians into the equation, I was hoping that the next few weeks at court would go smoothly and without much event, as I was sure Hestia and Caspian were also hoping.

Whilst I'd been preparing for bed, I'd been furiously thinking about what other motives somebody could have for possibly wanting to kill Florence and I was coming up empty. There were the obvious reasons: to try and scare her or she could possibly be being blackmailed and this was some way to push her into completing their demands or to show that they weren't bluffing, but I couldn't think of anything that the Swifton family were mixed up in that could warrant her making those kind of enemies.

She wasn't married so it couldn't be about her husband's unsavory business practices as it sometimes was and her parents were elderly and respectable, living far off into the countryside and the last time they had stepped foot into court would have been years ago. She also didn't have any radical beliefs - or at least none that I knew of - so her death didn't look to have any political motivations either.

I was clueless. And I hated being clueless. Like Karinna, not knowing the answer to something was one of my biggest gripes in life and that was probably one of the reasons why we were such good friends. Our differences lay in how we went about remedying this: Karinna would go out and try and source the answer herself while I pretended that I, in fact, knew the answer whilst stubbornly thinking it over for days on end.

The only reason that I knew so much about Florence's condition because Markus had been to check on several times throughout the evening already and the only reason I knew this was because every time on his return, he would come to my chamber and tell me how she was faring. Clearly he was feeling a lot of responsibility for what had happened which was ridiculous - he'd merely been
dancing with her - but I knew that if I were also in his situation, I would probably be harboring similar feelings.

Markus had also reported that, as well as him, Lucille had been to check up on her several times too and this had surprised me greatly. I knew that she had plenty of close friends around court, or at least friends who were close enough that they would fight on her side if she ever got caught up in anything, but to see her be so concerned about someone was unusual for her usually unreadable demeanor. Especially seeing as Florence wasn't a courtesan and didn't seem to have any clear links to any one of Lucile's businesses.

That was usually how she made her friends - if they could benefit her financially, she would stand firmly on their side. I felt sure that the last time she had shown Markus or I that sort of attention had been when we were young teenagers.

I placed the hairbrush down on my dressing table and rubbed at my eyes, repressing a deep sigh. The stress of having to worry about Markus all day, the drama what had happened with Florence and the heart palpitations caused by my conversation with the King had emotionally drained me in ways that I hadn't even realised.

The Lakosians had only been at court for a single day. How was I going to survive multiple weeks?

At least I knew that, for the next few weeks, life at court wouldn't be anything less than exciting, if that was even the correct term. If only I had made a better impression on Estella then being the sister of a drunkard.

Estella definitely wasn't the usual type of guest that arrived at court - they were usually small lords, earls or a grand duke at best - rather than the queen of a foreign nation so it seemed Caspian's advisors were pushing for him to make more ambitious, and advantageous, alliances and Estella was rich and powerful with gargantuan military numbers backing her and an imposing presence to match.

There wasn't very much known about the Lakosians, however, and that was something that was making me think. The Lakosians were shrouded in mystery, with a general ignorance surrounding their existence entirely, and whenever a little known ruler tried to stake a claim, I always felt uneasy. Everybody remembered what had happened with the King's late uncle even if they hadn't been present at the time - I had been living in Wedgemore at the time with my parents - and no one wanted a repeat of that violent Telmarine uprising.

There had been four years of peace and nobody wanted to ruin that.

I pushed myself up from the stool I was sitting on, wrapping my satin dressing gown tighter around myself as I made to pour myself a glass of water from the water jug. My rose was still standing proudly in its vase, the orange glow from the fire bringing out the deep red tones in the petals. It looked identical as to how it had when I'd left for the ball, and from when I'd received it this morning from Annalie.

The way that so many things could change and yet something would remain was startling: Markus now needed to be much more cautious as he had been, I needed to soothe over the tensions with Bayard, Florence had suddenly come down with an obscure affliction and I was plagued by the memories of my conversation with Caspian, where I had felt as though I was talking nothing but gibberish for a whole three minutes.

At least I only had to compose myself around one object of my affections - Markus had various lords and nobles that he found appealing and they could appear at any time, meaning he always had to be on his guard. That sounded particularly exhausting.
But like Markus, I knew that I had to keep my affection contained within myself. The repercussions of trying to engage in a relationship with the King would be catastrophic. Hestia and the high ranking nobles would never allow their King to be involved with an heiress of some obscure nation - and equally, very few people would be openly accepting of Markus’ relationship with another man.

I'd known since the moment I arrived at court that Hestia was ambitious in every sense of the word and wanted the very 'best' for herself and for Julien and Caspian - and that also included the court as a whole because her whole livelihood was ingrained into it. And the very best wasn't me. My title was insignificant to some of the other ladies within the court and I knew I wouldn't be able to get past that.

I felt particularly sorry for Julien sometimes because growing up with his entire life in the surveillance of the court can't have been easy, especially as his father died when he was barely more than a child. It explained why he appeared to be so diplomatic and upstanding all of the time - that was the way he had been brought up.

It seemed we were all plagued by our childhoods, for better or for worse.
I carefully turned the page as my eyes flickering upwards towards the door of the library where, through a gap between two bookshelves, I saw two Laksian ladies walk past. I regularly changed which secluded corner of the library I sat in, to avoid my location becoming too predictable. But, then again, anybody who knew me well enough would know, at the very least, to find me in this room.

The library was where I spent the vast majority of my time and I had been known to spend entire days sometimes curled up inside its walls as I worked my way through tomes on language and culture and geography of the world. Knowledge, to me, felt like power and a power that I could attainably hold in the palm of my hand, if I only continued to read and to learn and to study. It was always the not knowing something that I wanted to remedy, something that I had in common with Georgie but we had very different methods of finding the answers. I much preferred to read it in a book while she often felt like doing more of the literal leg work.

This suited her, though, because she had always been better at interacting with people than I had, even when I'd first met her and we'd both barely turned 16.

I knew that I could take the books back to my room and study from there but I preferred the comforting atmosphere of the library to my chamber that I could never seem to get warm in winter, no matter how large the fire was or how thick my cape was. People also knew not to disturb me here, something they didn't seem to care about when I was in my chamber even when they were asking questions about Father, and it was also more difficult for people to find me on account of the fact that I always sat hidden behind shelves and in alcoves.

I lived in the castle for so long, since the moment of my birth in fact, and it had begun to reach the point where I felt like I never had any time to myself or time where I could truly be alone and act without being judged by others. Sometimes I wanted to be alone and the library was one of the best places to do this.

On leaving my chamber, I'd heard from some gossiping passing servants that Lady Swifton was now in a stable condition and had been allowed to leave the confines of the physicians' rooms, on the account that she didn't leave the castle and checked in with them twice a day. The fact that she had returned to almost perfect health seemed staggering, especially considering how much blood she had been coughing up and how ill she'd appeared to be. I'd considered pushing my way through the crowds to help her but all the checks I would have done, learned from my countless times of reading medical books, Georgie had already completed.

Despite Lady Swifton's seemingly full recovery, there were still countless rumours circulating through the court regarding the cause of her illness and the most popular choice among the nobles seemed to magic, or that Lady Swifton was in fact a 'witch'.

I'd known that this reason was undoubtedly going to rear its head and I hadn't been surprised. Even though magic was surrounding us constantly, through our magical, enchanted ceremonies and even the talking animals that had found their places among the King's household, many people were still skeptical on the topic of humans possessing magic. They cope with magical objects, artefacts and even animals but once a person was thought to have magical powers, that was when people started to feel uneasy.
It tended to be the nobles of the older generation whose ideas were stuck in the past and didn't like the idea of women being powerful - they either had to be mute and agreeing or to be used for their entertainment. Having said that, there were still plenty of younger nobles whose attitudes towards women held little to be desired.

I'd set myself a task that morning, after allowing my maid Frieda to twist my hair into an elaborate plait, to read up on the relationship between the Narnians and the Lakosians because I wanted to know the truth about the history between the two groups, rather than just listen to the ridiculous and unfounded rumours that were circulating. The Lakosians seemed to be a very distant and isolationist kingdom and even Georgie, who was the most intelligent person that I knew and had read almost as many books as I had, knew very little about them.

I was particularly interested in Queen Estella because, despite her grand entrance and the spell she seemed to have cast over every man who set his eyes upon her and some of the ladies too, seemed to have appeared almost out of nowhere.

After a morning of scouring the shelves, the most convincing account of the Lakosians dated them back to a few centuries ago. It started with a power-hungry duke and his entire family falling out of favour with the crown and consequently being banished to a supposedly 'empty' island. However, it seemed the island wasn't deserted because the family started to reproduce with somebody and decades later, they tried to return to the mainland in order to reintegrate among society. It seemed that the family's punishment hadn't yet been served in full because they kept being forced back to the island by the king's armies and, of course, this led to a series of small battles across the years to keep the peace.

The most recent of these battles seemed to have occurred around 100 years ago with the king's great-grandfather killing a large number of the island's inhabitants in the battle. I had been unable to find much information on exactly what the inhabitants of the island were like aside from being 'unnaturally strong', which I considered to be the author's creative touch be using to make the inhabitants sound like immortal warriors, rather than regular people.

It seemed Queen Estella wanted to put the past behind her, however, and forge an alliance with the descendant of a man who killed her ancestors. Her actions seemed to be the epitome of diplomacy but, considering what Georgie had told me about the King's advisors pushing him to make more ambitious alliances and perhaps even offering one of marriage, perhaps diplomacy wasn't her only reason for acting now.

I didn't know how to feel about the possibility of having Queen Estella as my queen, too. I didn't know enough about her to make a clear judgement.

I did know, however, that Georgie would be heartbroken if the marriage alliance did go ahead, even if she would never admit it.

I looked up again at the sound of approaching footsteps and this time, it seemed, that I hadn't hidden myself away cleverly enough. As Father's pale blue eyes locked onto mine through the gap between the shelves, I turned back to my book. I was surprised he was even here - I'd have thought he would be locked in meetings all day about the cause of Lady Swifton's illness and whether they needed to be concerned about a threat on the King's life.

"How are you?" He asked, slowly stepping into the alcove and scanning the books that I had laid out in front of me. His strong, commanding voice that found it's home on the battlefield and in the council chambers was out of place here, in a place where the loudest voice didn't necessarily have the most power. It was too much, too overbearing, too proud. That summed him up quite well.
"You need to quieten your voice, this is a library." I said stiffly. He'd been acting prickly with me all of last week and two people could play at that game. He had told me on many occasions that when he'd been younger and first courting my mother he'd been something of a different man and had found himself in the library almost every day. He was right, that did sound like a different man. He'd never said whether his visits to the library had been to actually find a book to read or had been to spy on my mother, who had frequented it.

"Are you okay?" He repeated, his voice a little softer and I looked up at him. Many people had been wondering whether what Lady Swifton had come down with contagious. It seemed father had joined that club of paranoia.

"I'm fine. Just reading. Where are you going?" He was dressed in some of his actual clothing - a plain shirt and breeches - rather than his armor but his sword and dagger were still strapped to his belt and an ornate green cloak was hanging around his shoulders. I'd heard from soldiers that had served under him that he'd killed men with much less. "Don't you have training sessions to be doing? Or meetings with the King?"

"Yes, I'm meeting the King and his advisors shortly." He seemed almost annoyed that I knew his schedule or maybe I was just reading too deeply into his facial expressions. That was mostly all I had to go on these days. He barely spoke because he was so 'busy'. It had been that way for two years now and he'd yet to become not busy. "I'll see you before dinner."

That was another habit we had - making plans despite knowing we'd never stick to them. Or maybe he genuinely thought he would see me before dinner, I wasn't sure.

He slipped away between the shelves again and I swallowed deeply. I'd been taught from an early age how to tell if someone was lying - it was all thanks to my late Uncle Byran who had been a devoted alcoholic and would give his location to be every other place in town other than the tavern which was where he always was. He'd displayed all the signs to tell when someone is lying, my mother had told me, and I'd committed them all to memory long ago.

I'd also learned what my father's ticks were a long time ago, too, from when I'd interrogate him as to what my birthday present from him was. He was lying about something. It was almost painful how easy to tell it was.

- Not everything is as perfect as it first appears...
Chapter 9

Lysa Carker

At this point, Tristan had seen me covered in every baking ingredient under the sun so what did it matter if most of my hands and most of my face were covered in flour? Still, I knew that if Matron caught me walking from the kitchens to the stables with that much flour on me she'd accuse me of stealing kitchen ingredients and dock my pay. Apparently she'd done that a couple of months back to Olive after she'd left with chocolate icing on her fingers and I didn't want to take any chances. My apron was supposed to get dirty, that was the whole point of its existence, and even though it pained me slightly to wipe my flour-covered hands on it because I'd have to starch it white again later, it would have to do.

Tucked into the crook of my arm was the basket that I carefully placed my folded apron into - you couldn't wear your apron outside of the kitchens because of cross contamination - and checked that the sandwiches and fruit I'd prepared earlier hadn't been by some greedy footman. They were always loitering outside in the courtyard and some had the illusion that their so called 'senior' positon meant they could come, go and take what they pleased. I'd clobbered one around the head once with a pile of laundry for putting trying to take a jam tart.

I breathed in the fresh air as I briskly made my way through the courtyard - if I moved quickly, I wouldn't feel the chill as much - as the scent of boiling ovens, flour and steam was replaced with fresh flowers from the market and the crispness of the winter air. I didn't mind working in the kitchens so much in winter, it gave you a chance to warm up next to the ovens when Matron wasn't looking, but it became stifling hot in the summer to the point where most of us forwent our aprons and went to work in our shifts. Matron said it was improper and unseemly but even she left her cap and thick apron at her work station.

I knew Tristan would still be working in the stables, probably headfirst in hay or horse manure, because that's where he always was at this time of day and, given how easily it was for him to lose track of time, I knew that he wouldn't have yet eaten anything, hence the sandwiches and the fruit that I'd brought from home.

He was technically the King's personal manservant, meaning he shouldn't really have to spend his late mornings mucking out the horses, but Mrs. Boweson who was in charge of the servants sent him everywhere in the name of 'keeping up the King's appearance.' I was sure some of the actual grooms could manage an extra horse, but he insisted that he didn't mind. That was one thing about him, he'd never admit that the work was too much for him or that he needed a break.

I rounded the corner, having bypassed the stables that were reserved for the other nobles' horses, including Georgie's, and saw the door leading to the King's horses was wide open. I felt myself smirking as I slowed my pace, the unmistakable sound of whinnying horses leaching out.

"Hard at work?" Tristan was alone in the stables, his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows despite the cold to show the tanned skin that working outside brought, and straw sticking out of his hair. He was brushing down one of the King's horses, a tall grey stallion, and looked up as I leaned against the stable door. "It's lunchtime, you know. And you've got straw in your hair."

He rolled his eyes at me and, before I let him take the sandwich from my basket, grudgingly stood still as I picked out as much straw as I could find from his shaggy brown hair.

"All done." He leaned down to press a chaste kiss to my lips, then my nose and then my forehead,
before drawing away and taking the sandwich from my basket.

"Thank you." I could feel myself blushing, as I always did when he kissed me even though he'd done it a thousand times, and let him lead me over to the far end of the stable where all the tack was kept and where the bench, that had become our lunch spot, was located. I knew that if the other grooms had been present he'd been much less accommodating for me to pick the straw out his hair, but luckily for his appearance they were otherwise engaged.

I'd heard some of the grooms, on my many trips to the stables to ensure that he ate something and didn't faint with exhaustion, teasing him about how much time he spent with me which I found to be utterly ridiculous. They obviously didn't have anything better to do than to pick on happy people. Why was the sight of a man happy to spend time with his girlfriend so laughable?

"I'm surprised Mrs. Boweson gave you such a long break." Tristan said, in between bites of his mustard and ham sandwich. I knew it was his favourite so whenever I was able to find decent ham in the market, I'd be sure to make it for him. He, in return, would bring me fruit and flowers from the gardens - he'd always get away with it by saying it was for the King - and trinkets that he found in the market that he thought I'd like. "What with all the extra guests."

"I made her, really." I said with a shrug, watching Tristan smile. He'd often said that my stubbornness was one of his favourite qualities and that he'd found it rubbing off on him too. "I'm going home to check on Mother." When the kitchens became busy, we'd be allowed a half hour lunch break and this didn't allow enough time for me to come and find Tristan, eat our lunch and then return to I usually stayed in the kitchen with the other maids. That was where the other maids were today, but I'd pushed for special circumstances seeing as Mother was on the brink of giving birth to her fifth child and, with Father busy working all day with my brothers, I wanted to check on her.

I knew that I had nothing to worry about - she'd given birth four times before and they had all gone without a hitch - but I couldn't help being filled with nerves. I'd heard the horror stories from the ladies maids' at what had happened to their mistresses. Some had lost their babies and some had even died themselves and no matter how many times I reassured myself that Mother would be absolutely fine, there was still a side of me that wanted to shake with nerves.

I wouldn't not go and see her, however, and almost hoped that Father was too busy at work to be at home when the time came. I loved him so much that it made my heart ache and yet he could be so overbearingly protective sometimes that his stress would affect everybody else and the last thing I wanted was for Mother to be in a stressful environment.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Tristan asked and I shook my head, licking the remnants of the mustard and flour from my fingers.

"I'll be okay. The doctor said to try and limit the number of visitors she has."

"Send her my best wishes?"

"You know I will." I said, leaning forward to kiss a speck of mustard from the corner of his mouth. "She's hoping for another girl, I think."

I was her first and, as of yet, only girl and in a house with just herself and I against Father and my three brothers, she'd joked that the sides needed to be evened up a little.

"If she's anything like you, then she'll be perfect." Tristan grinned, taking my hand in his own and squeezing it as he leaned over to kiss my cheek. I rolled my eyes but started grinning too.
"Maybe Georgie's right and you really should start writing ballads." He gave me a confused look and I giggled.

"I'm tone deaf. No one would by them."
"I'd buy them."
"That would be a waste of money." He said pointedly as I reached into my basket and passed him an apple. Even though it was winter, there were large greenhouses stationed all around the castle grounds so that fruit could be grown throughout the year. "Why pay for them when I can tell them to you for free?"

"And afterwards," I continued, digging my shorn nails into the skin of my orange. "I need to find Georgie to ask her about one of her dresses. I'm sure there's going to be more balls coming up if the King wants to make a good impression and I want her to look good."

"In a couple of weeks, it's the servants ball." Tristan reminded me with a smirk and I bit my lip. The servants ball was an annual event held near Yule and was basically a chance for all the servants to take the day off. I loved dancing and spending time with Tristan, and my friends, but I was always worried about not having anything to wear. I'd stained the dress I'd worn last year making blackberry jam so I couldn't even wear that anymore because the stain had refused to come out. I'd loved that dress, too.

I'd probably end up making myself a dress, which was what I ended up doing with the majority of my clothes. I'd buy the fabric and the thread and the buttons myself and then stitch it all together but that would take time, more than the two and a half weeks that I had, seeing as I could only work in the evenings and at weekends when I wasn't working. Buying a dress was also out of the question; with the arrival of a new baby any minute, money was hard to come by and I didn't want to use all of my wages on just one dress.

"I know, I remember." I said, somewhat gloomily, and saw Tristan narrow his eyes as he squeezed my hand again.

"Will you attend with me?" I shook my head, watching his eyes narrow even further but this time I felt myself smirking.

"I promised I'd go with Mortimer." Tristan rolled his eyes so dramatically that it sent me into a fit of giggles. He snaked an arm around my waist and pulled me closer to him, kissing me gently on the lips to halt my laughter. "I might have, you know."

"Mortimer is old enough to be your father and I'm not sure he can ever leave his station in front of the silver cabinet for more than five minutes in case some dust sporadically forms." I started giggling again, pushing the thought of the servant's ball to the back of my mind. I could worry about that later.

"And then, I have to get back doing the laundry." I said. Even though I was technically Georgie's maid, this wasn't seen as a 'full time job' like being the King's manservant was, meaning Mrs. Boweson gave me other tasks as well. "I'm basically doing a bit of everything because I have to look after the Lakosian ladies as well. They brought about 10 servants between all of them."

"Mrs. Boweson'll get me on washing duty soon, then." He teased but both of us knew that she never would. The King had to look his best at all times.

"All of their sheets smell like...something,"

"What do you mean?"
"I don't know, everything smells like lavender and something...smoky. I don't know if it's an incense
or a candle that they all burn but all their sheets reek of it."

"I like lavender so that sounds quite nice." Tristan smiled and I ignored him, gently nudging his leg with my foot.

"What are you doing today, then? Why are you on your own?"
"Getting the King's horses ready for the hunt tomorrow." I rolled my eyes. "What?"

"There's always a hunt." I insisted, leaning over to rest my head on his shoulder. "And why people would want to go trekking through a forest in winter is beyond me."

"All the other grooms are probably doing the laundry." Tristan smiled and I nodded.

"I can actually believe that. I'll ask Georgie whether she wants to go on the hunt. I doubt it, though. She's busy trying to stop Lord Bayard from invading Wedgemore over a load of a wood. She might have to. Lord Markus will be jumping at the chance - "

"Why do I have to go?" Tristan mused, twirling a lock of my hair around his finger. "Do you think I can pretend to be sick and hide behind some bales of hay? I'd much rather stay here with you."

"What's so bad about it?" I asked, turning my head to look up at him. I had to admit that spending the day with him, considering a large portion of the nobles would be riding around the woods, did sound lovely. I'd be able to kiss him at whatever chance I got and he could come and help out in the kitchens and -

"I always get made to carry the dead pheasants."

"You get paid to do that." I said, smiling up at him and he sighed. "Georgie doesn't get paid to do it. She doesn't have an option."

We might all complain about the hours we had to work and the conditions in the summer but Georgie had had absolutely no choice as to her path in life, being the daughter of the lord of a manor and a city. She might enjoy her role now, I'd never known someone to put so much effort and hard work into something that they didn't exactly get paid for, but I felt sure that the prospect hadn't been as interesting when she had been a child.

She, and Markus, had been forced into their position in life and there was nothing they could do about it.
Chapter 10

Lady Georgiana Howard

I spent the morning replying to all our correspondences and spent a particular amount of time writing a suitably angry and direct response to be returned to Bayard on the question of his timber shipment and, as a secondary measure, also sent a letter to the council whom oversaw the smooth running of Wedgemore, whilst Markus and I resided at court and managed things from here, just to be forewarned in case any attack of retaliation from Bayard did reach our borders.

I didn't think that he would dare chance it because he now knew that if he pulled anything silly then I would pull our timber shipment from his lands entirely, but I felt more comforted to have a plan in place in case he decided to act rashly.

All the talk of attacks and retaliation had begun to make me slightly nervous in regards to the state of our military and I hoped that Markus had been having better luck than I had recently and had achieved something in securing more troops for his. This was his general role in our proceedings - we both had equal control over the finances and while I oversaw more of our alliances and the general day-to-day running of Wedgemore, Markus was concentrated more on the military and border control side of the coin, seeing as he was a skilled soldier himself.

Many of his arrangements regarding more troops were the result of a drunken evening where a duke would be forced to say more than he would do sober to which Markus would then hold him to and force him to comply. In return, we would often exchange some of the many raw resources and materials that Wedgemore was able to produce in its fertile land for this protection and development of our army so that, if we were ever pushed into the event of a war, we would more comfortably be able to fight off an opponent, seeing as it was our army that seemed to be always lacking.

The building up of our army also meant that we could be less reliant on other, larger, kingdoms for protection because it was often the larger nations whose loyalties became frayed and would cut us out and then leave us defenseless, despite having made claims of being allies to us. I could remember several times this had happened when I'd been a child and while hardly any of these times had been during a time of a war, the message had been made clear in my mind that the only way to minimize this from happening was to manage our armies ourselves.

Speaking of Markus, I was currently trying to find him. Aside from our brief passing in the corridor this morning, I hadn't seen him since and I was eager to report the situation with Bayard to him - telling each other of every development that happened, no matter how trivial, was one of the foundations that we worked off because if both us didn't know all of the information then we couldn't work effectively.

I'd already dispatched a passing servant to check his room for him and that search had yielded no results so after combing the Great Hall and the library (he had been known to occasionally curl up with a book) I decided to take a turn in the castle grounds to see if I could locate him there. On my travels I found Karinna roaming the corridors on the West side of the castle, probably trying to avoid her father, and she decided to join me on my hunt.

I knew that her relationship with her father was strained, to say the very least, and had been ever since her mother had died two years ago. It almost seemed like she had been the glue that had held the pair of them together and now that she was gone, there was nothing to prevent them from floating apart and hurling subtle insults at each other in the process. To be fair to Karinna, her father did spend an astronomical amount of time in meetings with the Royal Guard or the cavalry or the King
or training all of the troops that fought and served under him - that was to say, all of them.

It wasn't any easier when you managed to get her father out of these meetings either because even in his free time he would talk and think about the military maneuvers that he wasn't practicing and Karinna seemed to spend every one of her waking moments in the library.

As we walked, I was carefully watching her expression out of the corner of my eye. She seemed to be tenser than she normally was; I could see it in the way she was tightly holding onto her shoulders and the rigidness of her spine as she moved.

"Have you had any communication with Lord Julien?" I asked nonchalantly, knowing there was a higher chance she wouldn't reply if I didn't use at least one of his titles.

"Not since last night," She said, with a slight roll of her eyes. "Not since you forced me to dance with him."

"I most certainly did not force you. That was Markus - " I added.

"I'm surprised he even knew what a woman looked like, considering how much time he spends in those council meetings of his." So she was feeling tense as well as bitter, was she? I could work with that.

"Well, I - "

"I wasn't finished."

"Right." I felt myself smiling, even though there was no real humour in the situation at all. Karinna was just so...Karinna...that I knew when she found herself in one of her grumpy and bitterly resentful moods, it was best to just roll with the tumult of emotions that followed. I felt that she was justified, considering her father didn't seem to want anything to do with her and the majority of court treated her like a pariah.

"I would have much rather danced with Markus."

"But you wouldn't because he definitely is not interested in you in that way - " I added in before she could stop me.

"And neither is Lord Julien." Karinna shot back, a flicker of a smile on her face. Once I managed to steer her onto a topic of conversation that didn't concern her father, her wonderfully sarcastic humour returned.

And on the subject of Julien, I would beg to differ. I'd noticed during The Rose Hallows that he had been one of her admirers that had been watching her at the altar when she had received her rose. I knew that this could be nothing more than her holding an appealing aestheticism, which was what seemed to draw a lot of nobles to her, but something told me that Julien was different. He seemed too intelligent, too astute to allow himself to fall simply for appearances.

Or maybe this was his fatal flaw? What if the logical, forward-thinking Lord Julien found himself falling for the ethereal, seemingly impenetrable Lady Karinna?

I was allowing myself to be swept away by fanciful, romantic notions that had no substance in reality.

But had I? I felt sure that I'd seen Julien watching her last night at the ball and he seemed too...mature to be caught up in the objectifying ways of the rest of the court. I also seriously doubted whether
Caspian would choose his best friend to be a man who judged a person wholly based off their appearance.

I supposed I was rather biased, however.

"Where do you think he'll be?"
"I'm presuming that he's training." I said as we rounded the corner and were immediately hit with a sharp gust of wind. The training grounds were located towards the rear of the castle and arguably suffered from the harshest conditions; but perhaps this was supposed to be the point and the unpredictable weather provided a sort of endurance training for the soldiers. "I don't know where else he could be."

"In this weather?" Karinna pulled her blue velvet cloak tighter around her shoulders and I immediately starting cursing myself for allowing my eagerness to find Markus to overshadow my sense of practicality. My favourite plum velvet cloak, that Lysa had specially washed and ironed for me as the weather seemed to have turned, was hanging on the front of my wardrobe as opposed to around my shoulders.

I was just going to have to bite it.

The sky was pale and grey as Karinna and I left the stone path leading from the castle and started making our way across the grass. They had to train a reasonable distance away from the castle so that no wayward arrows found themselves lodged into the castle walls or, indeed, any passers-by.

"They train in all weathers." I insisted, wrapping my arms around myself. I was sure that, judging from the sky, snow would soon be on the horizon and that would bring its own patchwork of problems to deal with. The bitterly cold air was enough to deal with at the moment. "He says it's because he's so dedicated but I think it's so he can easily spend time with the nobles, whether that may be to flirt or to attempt to set up some kind of business deal depends on the particular noble involved I suppose."

"What about the Lakosian soldiers? Do you think they'll be training?" One thing that had surprised me about the Lakosian visit was that Estella hadn't brought a separate army or cavalry with her; it seemed the nobles that fluttered around her like butterflies and kept her company were also her soldiers in arms. They were multifunctional and not just flashy window dressing.

"I hadn't really thought about it. I suppose so; I highly doubt whether the King would ban them from it." I saw Karinna's mouth flicker into a smirk as I mentioned the King. I didn't call him by his first name all of the time. I had to retain some sense of propriety somewhere.

The ground dipped to give way to a small ridge and as we climbed up the other side, the soldiers finally came into view, the clash of metal and wood filling the air. They were sprawled across the landscape almost like ants, each one practicing and honing their skills in different disciplines and among the familiar faces - Sir Gideon still seemed to have some feelings towards Karinna as we approached- were several that seemed unfamiliar.

"So yes, the Lakosians are training." I said as we paused for a moment, my eyes searching for Markus among the sea of faces I didn't recognise.

"And they're all expert swords-people." Karinna mused, her eyes focused on a practice duel that was occurring to her left. I sighed and brushed some hair from my eyes as the wind whipped around us.

"Of course they are. So Estella has money, power, people's support and a fantastic army. Anything else?"
"She doesn't have a husband." Karinna reminded me with a hint of irony in her voice as we slowly started walking forwards, scanning the crowds for any sign of Markus.

"I don't think that's particularly high on her list. She doesn't seem like the kind of person who'd be eager to settle down in that way." I had no doubt that she probably had legions of suitors who would be willing to bed her, willing didn't even seem like the right word, but there had been something in her stare, her stance, that made me know any man who she lured in would be spat right back out if he did anything other than please her.

I could admire that about her. She didn't seem to take any nonsense from anybody, even if that was from Markus or myself.

We steadily began to circumnavigate the training field, my eyes jumping from person to person in an attempt to identify them. There were so many of them, however, that it was difficult to pick out individual features among the swirling mass of hair, leather and metal.

I did notice, however, the female soldiers who were training on the field and I felt a small ripple of pride inside my chest. Caspian had decided that he would offer military training to anyone who wanted it - regardless of sex - and a small yet effective female army had began to recently emerge. It was about time in my book. Frankly, it was preposterous that it had taken so long.

If I wasn't bound to Wedgemore I would have seriously considering joining, if to do nothing but prove the naysayers wrong about women being fit for a battlefield. We fought battlefields every day, battlefields that men didn't even have to think about conquering and, for many of them, never did think about.

"Come on Markus, where the hell are you?" I murmured, noticing that the soldiers nearest to me were beginning to stare. I ignored their gazes. I had better things to do. "You'd think they'd never seen a woman before." I mumbled to Karinna and she smirked, keeping her eyes pinned on the crowd.

"I don't think that's quite what they're thinking." I rolled my eyes at her words, my eyes suddenly locking onto two figures fiercely dueling with swords, hard looks of concentration on their faces.

Julien had always been a more proficient archer - in my opinion, he deserved a permanent position in the military because I'd never seen him miss a target - than a swordsman and this seemed to be yet another point that Hestia held against him. So while Julien helped Caspian with his archery skills (not that he needed it), Caspian assisted him with his general swordsmanship. They were both rather competitive, so it seemed.

I suddenly didn't mind the cold as much. I now had a much more motivational reason for me to stand in the path of the unforgiving wind.

"So I've found Markus." Karinna said suddenly and I whipped my head around to follow her gaze.

"Really? Where?"

She gestured in front of her and I followed her hand, my eyes narrowing as I saw a group of soldiers seeming to be having a gleeful wrestling match with each other, with one poor soldier having pulled the wrong end of the stick as he was being kicked in all directions.

Wait.

I caught a flash of golden hair as the man pushed himself to his feet and charged at the soldier who seemed to have instigated the beating, I saw Karinna bite her lip.
"For God's sake..." I murmured, gripping Karinna by the elbow as we hurried forwards.

The man in the middle of the circle, the one currently having the living daylights kicked out of him, was Markus. Because of course it bloody was.

As we got closer, I began to recognise the soldiers' faces - most of them were part of Hestia's private cavalry that she'd commissioned and therefore got to personally select the members. This purely meant that her soldiers were the sons and nephews of wealthy businessmen, lords and dignitaries that she wanted to have safely in her pocket. I hadn't met one member who wasn't a complete pompous prat. Knowing them, they'd probably started goading Markus and he'd retaliated.

But he could never just leave something, could he?

"MARKUS!" I screeched, my voice halting the soldiers for a long enough moment that Markus was able to get to his feet and sock the ringleader in the jaw, sending him tumbling to the floor.

Good shot.

His comrades obviously didn't think so as they started on Markus again. He was ruthlessly outnumbered and I could feel my hands tensing up as he let out a deep groan. My legs couldn't move fast enough.

"Markus!" I tried again, close enough know to reach out and punch one of them myself if they did anything silly. The ringleader was upright again now, a charming smile plastered across his half bruised face but I could almost see the sarcasm ready to drip from his lips as he laid his eyes on me. Whatever Hestia was teaching them, it wasn't to be a considerate, compassionate member of society - it was to be a misogynistic twat.

"Lady Georgiana! Fancy seeing you here!" He sneered, his eyes trailing over my figure and focusing directly on to my cleavage. I almost expected this sort of behavior nowadays; the vast proportion of the male population of court seemed to be transfixed on my larger than average breasts (but what was an average size?) and I'd learned to combat their wandering eyes with a firm glare. Next to me, I saw Karinna's hands immediately drop to her sides - probably so that she would be quicker in restraining me if the situation got out of hand.

"Sir...somebody. I can never remember." I smirked back, casting a look down at Markus as he rolled onto his knees, his face battered and blood running down his chin. One of the men made to punch him again and I had to dig my nails into my palms to stop myself from jumping on him.

"Georgie, it's - " Markus croaked but I cut him off with a glare. Sir Solomon's - because of course I remembered his name, pretending to forget it was half of the fun - smug smile widened.

"The next one of you who moves is going to end up with their face in the dirt, so I suggest you let this go and find something else to occupy your time."

"You'd really do that? Wouldn't you be afraid of getting your skirts dirty?" In reality, yes, I would, because the dress I was currently wearing was one of my favourites but I'd be willing to throw that aside if it meant preventing Markus from being pulverized 5 to 1.

Clearly, I didn't answer quick enough because Solomon spun away from me, his leg poised to kick Markus squarely in the chest. Before he could, however, I kicked him firmly between the legs and reached my hand out to Markus so that he could pull himself to his feet. Karinna was staring back at another one of the soldiers, daring him with her eyes to move which, on a day like today, could be confused for blocks of ice.
We left Solomon rolling around on the ground and his compatriots quickly scattered because all the noise of the skirmish had attracted the attention of Caspian, who I heard giving Solomon a rather firm berating. His defense was poor as he tried to drag me into his mess, insisting that "the bitch kicked me."

Caspian wasn't much a fan of that either.

"Come on," I ordered, my eyes taking in the true extent of Markus' bruises and draping one of his arms along Karinna's shoulders and another across my own. "We're going."

- Because even in Narnia there are still social prejudices because people and even talking animals can be downright cruel sometimes.
Chapter 11

Lady Karinna Sternwood

Georgie and I paraded Markus back to his chamber, ignoring the curious looks that we received from passing nobles and servants. I could see the anger and frustrated firmly set inside Georgie's clenched fists, her straining muscles, her tight smile as she pushed open the door to his chamber and immediately headed for the water jug on the dining table.

I watched Markus sag down into an armchair and let out a deep sigh. Despite his protests on the way back to the castle that he'd had it handled and that he was perfectly fine, I could see the dark swelling beginning to appear across his face and the sharpness of his breathing; if I had to guess, I would say that the bruising on his face would be nothing compared to the marks covering his torso and ribs. His assailants had definitely got in a couple of good hits.

"I was outnumbered, really, wasn't I?" He mused, forcing a smile onto his face and trying to appear cheerful. His comment had no affect on Georgie, however, as she pulled a chair up to face him and began, slightly aggressively, wiping away the streaks of blood on his face and attempting to blot his bleeding lip.

"Just a little bit." I replied, watching Georgie's eyes narrow as, after pressing the square of cloth down against his lip, it still continued to bleed. Her annoyance might have been clear but her care for her brother was also. I wasn't quite sure which was the winning sentiment, at the moment.

And while Markus may be feeling somewhat jubilant - or was putting it on to try and pacify Georgie - at the fact two of his assailants noses had been bleeding by the end of their fight, he had definitely been dealt the blunt end of the stick. I knew that Markus was an exceptional fighter, that was partly the reason he was in charge of Wedgemore's military affairs, but any man would have struggled against five also exceptional fighters who had a point to prove.

"I got in a few good hits, though, didn't I? I don't think they'll be saying anything else for a while - " I had known Markus wouldn't have been the one to ignite the conflict, no matter how daring and short-tempered he sometimes was. And I only had to imagine what derogatory comments the soldiers had thrown into his face, regarding his bedroom habits. Or rather, lack of bedroom habits...

"You did hit Sir Solomon in the face." I added, getting slightly worried at Georgie's silence. Just how frustrated was she? Had something else happened with Lord Bayard? Did she have a migraine? Were her nerves and capabilities already being stretched like a tight leash and this was what would finally snap her?

"They obviously felt threatened which is why they aimed for my prettiest feature." Markus said, gesturing to his face as Georgie squeezed the cloth into a shallow dish and a trickle of blood dripped into the water.

"They had to hit you in the face because it was the only place that would have had any impact." Georgie said flatly, soaking the cloth in the water again before pressing it back against the corner of his lip - the bleeding appeared to be stubborn.

"What about - " He trailed off, raising an eyebrow in Georgie's direction and vaguely gesturing towards his crotch. Georgie met his gaze, staring him directly in the eye.
"It wouldn't have done anything." Markus opened his mouth to say something but Georgie seized his chin in her hand and clamped his mouth shut in order to put more pressure on his bleeding lip. I suppressed a smirk. Georgie could be as a sharp as a blade when she wanted to be.

"I don't get why you're so angry." Markus said slowly and I felt my eyes widen slightly. Did he have a death wish? But, then again, he and Georgie had such strong personalities that they were always going to clash. "I'll be fine. They were the ones who started it, I was just defending myself - "

Georgie sighed, pushing the chair back so it screeched against the tiled floor and threw the wet cloth onto the table. I stepped forwards to say something, do anything to possibly calm the situation, but Georgie was practically shaking with frustration, her eyes blazing, and the tiredness clear in her frame. I sometimes forgot, largely because of the way Georgie would usually insist everything was perfectly fine, that while I might feel I was clutching at thin air in regards to my relationship with Father, Georgie had the entire wellbeing of a city resting on her shoulders.

"I don't care who started it." Her words were sharp and slow, the meaning behind them perfectly clear. "That is not the point."

"Then what is the bloody point? I'm tired of you going off the rails at everything I do or don't do. You're not in charge of me, Georgie!" Markus pushed himself up from his chair, disguising his wince remarkably well, as he raised his voice. It wasn't hard to see how he could be at home in the council chamber and on the battle field. He had the ability to create an insurmountable presence that Georgie would constantly try and match. And sometimes surpass.

"The soldiers who attacked you come from powerful families, overflowing with money who have support in high places." I could see that Georgie was trying to keep her voice calm but her tone was scathing. "They have no concerns because they know that they will be fed and clothed and have a ready-made reputation that is keeping them afloat. Hestia will be there to pick up the pieces. We, on the other hand, have none of that. We have barely any monetary support coming, not since Lord Saunton tried to invade and you shot his daughter - "

"That was - "

"I don't care if it was an accident! It bloody happened and that's bad enough!" Georgie was shouting now, her vexation practically burning a hole inside my chest. "We have no real, trusted allies - "

Markus remained silent and I thought this was a good decision. Georgie looked ready to strike someone, the tension that had clearly been building up inside of her for a long time finally bursting out and leaving her looking like a wild cat ready to pounce. She was drained and bitter and sick of Markus' shit, as she'd so eloquently put it. No one was high enough to escape her glare or her words. No one, not even the King.

Georgie stormed past me, a tightlipped smile on her face and her hands clenched into fists as she wrenched open the door and disappeared into the corner, her footsteps clattering against the tiles.
Markus sighed and I turned back to face him, watching him take the damp cloth and press it to his lip, giving me a long look.

"I'll go after her in a minute." In a minute so I didn't get a cushion or a shoe thrown at my head.

"You think I'm an idiot, don't you?" Markus said, hissing slightly as he bent over to tug his boots off. I paused for a moment - Markus might be the brother of my closest friend but he was still a lord and all the lessons I'd be taught growing up were spinning around in my head. "I can tell."

"A well-meaning idiot, maybe."

"The thing about Georgie is she's too wound up. She's not enjoying or living her life if she's walking around being constantly irritated by everything that see and worrying about the consequences. Yes, I got into a fight and yes, some reputable lords have probably heard about it by now but I wasn't going to let them go around thinking saying stuff like that is okay. If anything, I was trying to improve my reputation."

I raised an eyebrow at him and he smirked.

"It's not for ladies ears. I do have some element of decorum left." I gave him a hard look - I knew that he didn't care about that sort of decorum - sheltering women from things that were supposedly indecent - because that sort of decorum was pure nonsense. Women weren't delicate, wilting flowers that needed to be protected from the truth about the world, we were people too. "Your father would probably decapitate me if I told you. I don't need anymore prices on my head."

"The thing about Georgie," I said firmly, linking back to his previous words, "is that she wants to protect you."

"I don't need protecting. I'm her older brother, believe it or not. She's not my mother..." As soon as the words left his lips, I could see the panic form in his eyes, the blanching of his face and the way he was furiously trying to retract his words. I was used to people treading on eggshells around me. That was something I had hated.

Except from Georgie. Georgie had never done that. She had never treated me as though I was something broken, something to be fixed.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "No, because mothers' seem to be a rare commodity these days."

"I'm sorry. I'm stupid, I didn't think - "

"I know." He smirked and I looked down at my hands, wiping a spot of dirt from my palm. "Georgie will do anything in her power to keep you and Wedgemore safe and she puts too much pressure on herself to try and achieve that. And, I don't think you particularly help her sometimes - " I bit my lip, staring back into Markus' bright blue eyes that were identical to Georgie's. I didn't speak out like that, voice my opinion so harshly, to most people. Having a father as a General in the army meant diplomacy was ingrained into my very being, into the very essence of who I was, but after being close with Georgie for over four years now, I was beginning to let my true opinion spill out.

"I know that." Markus said finally. "I know I can be an idiot sometimes and rush into things and be reckless. But, I'm trying - "

I knew that, while everything that Markus had said regarding his character was true it didn't take anything away from the love that he felt for Georgie. There was something almost childlike about his blatant, unconditional love for her, something that so deeply contrasted with the world that he'd been thrown into. He cared about her more than anybody else that I knew and I could see that, unlike
some of the nobles at court, he wasn't actively trying to make trouble for himself, it just seemed to
find him.

Maybe trouble really did find him. Maybe that was how society worked for people like him, people
who dared exist outside of what was deemed conventional and therefore made every second of his
days more challenging to navigate. The world had twisted his very nature, his whole identity into
something that was wrong and unorthodox and something that he needed to be punished for. No one
ever really specifically talked about Markus' preference for men, aside from Georgie, but it was clear
to see in the glances people gave each other when he passed.

I lingered by the door for a moment, carefully watching him shrug off his jacket and stretch out his
tired muscles. Perhaps his recklessness, his eagerness to jump into a fight, wasn't really who he was;
it seemed to contrast so directly with the tactician that I had seen on the training field.

Or rather it was part of who he was, but had been born out of a sense of inner self-doubt, of self-
loathing, of feeling that if everyone was already against him, then why shouldn't he assist them in
thinking so?

Maybe I was thinking too deeply into matters. I should probably discuss the subject with Georgie,
first, seeing as she would be the person who knew him best and had known him far longer than I
had. All her life.

But Markus' character seemed to click into place and became a little clearer as I silently left the room.
I twisted the sections of hair between my fingers, briefly checking my reflection in the mirror to ensure that the plait was in the center of my head before continuing to twist the sections of hair around each other. I'd woken up earlier than I usually did and instead of simply lying in bed for hours and waiting for Lysa to deliver my breakfast, I'd decided to start getting ready and spend some time on my hair. I knew that the wind would be forceful on the hunt later and I didn't want my vision to be obscured by the strands of hair flying around my face.

I didn't know why I'd awoken so early, aside from the small amount of guilt that I was still reeling from. I'd avoided Markus for the majority of yesterday and after I'd left his room, I'd spent of my time trying on dresses and having Lysa comment on whether they needed to be repaired. I'd managed to talk to him briefly after dinner when I'd gone to check that his injuries hadn't manifested into anything more serious and he hadn't seemed to harbor any hard feelings. We'd actually managed to have a very constructive conversation about our position on Lord Bayard; we'd turned onto a new chapter, it seemed.

I had also been slightly surprised on waking that I'd managed to sleep through the night and I hadn't been awoken by guards who would lead me to the chopping block - not that Caspian actually beheaded people anymore - but that had been the image my mind had conjured, seeing as I had ultimately kicked Solomon in the balls and was related to the man who had vomited onto the Queen of Lakosia.

The very fact that I was still alive to tell the tale seemed to be something of a miracle.

I didn't forget my cape this time, tying it securely around my shoulders and checking that the plum didn't clash with the pale grey of my dress before leaving my chamber. I could feel the icy air sinking into the very foundations of the castle and if there had been any doubt to whether it was winter or autumn, that doubt had now been erased from my mind.

It was particularly chilling in the early morning and I didn't want to take any chances; a cool breeze might often be the ideal thing to soften my headaches but the steely coldness of winter often made them worse (in addition to this, extreme heat in summer also seemed to increase the pain and the frequency) and I really did not want to have to suffer two migraines in the same week. Especially not when I'd been drawling on about how reputations were important. I didn't need to appear any weaker than I already did.

There was little more that I could do, however, than wrap up warm and hope. I tried not to spend too much time outside but even inside the castle, the chill in the air was palpable and my chamber would sometimes get so cold that my teeth would begin to chatter.

The corridor outside my chamber was deserted as I stepped out and silently shut the door behind me. I knew that most of the castle would still be sleeping but one person who always rose early was Karinna so I was almost guaranteed to find her awake, either in her chamber or the library.

I quietly made my way down the corridor, not wanting to wake any of the other ladies whose chambers were located close to mine, the draft creating from my swinging skirts biting at my legs. The castle felt eerily quiet as I moved through the corridors, the emptiness greeting me with every corner that I turned around. I knew that it was early but there were usually more people milling
around than this, no matter the hour.

Just as I turned the corner, I spotted the figure of Tristan heading in the opposite direction and hauling a bag of what I presumed was Caspian's washing on his back. I was sure that he was cold in only his tunic, trousers and faded blue jacket but I knew that Tristan would never tell you otherwise. He smiled slightly as he met my gaze before sighing as he readjusted the strap of the laundry bag.

"I'm going to have to go the long way to the laundry with all this," He complained, gesturing to the laundry, "seeing that they've closed the corridor off."

Wait a minute. What?

"They've done what? Which corridor?" Tristan's expression darkened as I folded my arms. They never boarded off parts of the castle, especially not corridors which everyone used to navigate the castle. Or at least they hadn't in the four years that I'd been living within the castle walls.

"All I know is that they've boarded the corridor leading to the east wing off."

"Boarded off? And who's they?" My curiosity was growing with every passing second, as well as the unease that was swirling in my stomach.

"There's guards on either side of the corridor and they're not letting anybody through." Tristan explained.

"Why?" He shrugged.

"I don't know. I've asked some of the servants but they don't seem to know either. And the guards weren't going to tell me so - "

"Where's the King?" Tristan was his servant and I was fairly sure it was written on his contract that he had to know the King's location twenty three hours of the day.

"Not in his chamber." Tristan said, pulling the laundry bag further up his shoulder. "I usually complete all my tasks with the horses and collect any of his washing before I take him his breakfast but when I passed the door to his chamber, it was already open."

The nausea and dread in my stomach were now threatening to overwhelm me. Whatever was happening over on the east side of the castle involved the King. That did not sound particularly promising.

"If I find out what's going on I'll tell you." I promised, my mind already wandering to just what could be happening down that corridor.

Tristan nodded. "And what do you mean if?" He added with a smirk and his light-heartedness clamed my nerves slightly.

"Did you see anyone else down the corridor?"

"No one else but guards. And the King if that's what you're presuming. I tried to go down and didn't see anyone in the actual corridor itself so he must have been inside one of the chambers that lead off that main corridor. Oh - and I think I might have heard General Sternwood speaking."

"Really?" That did pique my interest. Both the King and the General? At such an early hour of the morning?

Regardless of what was happening, Sternwood would be my way in. I had a better chance of
Speaking to him that to anybody else. He would be the gap in the wall that I would need to exploit. ***

I spent a little time moving down to the east wing on the castle, seeing if any of the servants or nobles that I passed could glean me any extra information, which they couldn't. There were countless possibilities of what could be happening but I didn't want to focus on any one idea just yet. I had to keep my options open.

I briefly paused around the corner, listening intently to the low voices that I could hear. Sternwood had to still be there; if he wasn't, I didn't know how else I would be able to find out what was going on, short of running down the corridor and hoping none of the guards managed to catch and arrest me or begging to Caspian which was something I didn't particularly want to have to stoop to.

The dread was still lying dormant in my stomach and I tried to push this aside and instead think logically. This particular corridor was home to a handful of military officials and high-ranking soldiers, which could explain Sternwood's presence regardless of whether anything had happened or not.

I wasn't going to find anything out by cowering behind a wall for the remainder of the morning, that was for sure.

I pushed off the wall and started down the corridor, wearing the same, bleary-eyed and dazed expression that I was often wearing at such an early hour of the morning. That would be my reasoning if anybody asked what I was doing - I hadn't known about the barricades that were in place and I was too tired to pay any attention.

"I'm sorry milady, you can't go down there." I jolted back at the arm that was pressed firmly into my stomach, preventing me from moving forwards. Of course I'd seen the guard loitering by the wall but I had to give off the impression that I hadn't. "It's the King's orders."

Was it now? Interesting...

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realise - " I feigned, peering over the shortest guard's head to spot Hestia, Caspian and Sternwood all gathered in a doorway and talking in low voices. "I don't need to go down, I just need to talk to General Sternwood." I raised my voice a little, hoping that my voice would carry, and it seemed to work as Hestia, Caspian and Sternwood all immediately looked up.

"You need to speak to me?" I nodded, mentally crossing my fingers as I straightened up.

"Yes, sir. It's regarding Lady Karinna." I could also use this opportunity to see just how much he appeared to care about his daughter and whether he even remembered her name whilst he was working.

"I'll just be a moment." Sternwood murmured and started towards me, the guards parting to let him through. I noticed Hestia glaring in my direction as I stepped around the corner to allow some element of privacy. I did not need Hestia overhearing my questions and shooing my away. Her look had told me enough about her feelings towards my presence.

"Good morning." He was ever the diplomat, his hands clasped loosely behind his back as he stared down at me from his imposing height. It wasn't difficult to see who Karinna had inherited this particular family trait from.

"Good morning, sir." It didn't hurt to be polite, particularly when talking to a General.

"You wanted to speak to me. About Karinna?" It took a small amount of effort on my part to keep
my mouth closed and not spout a sarcastic comment about how surprising it was that he could remember her name. That wouldn't help matters.

"Yes, sir. I've just been to see her and...and she's panicking rather a lot. She's heard about the corridor being closed off and now she's feeling rather unsafe. She's refusing to leave her room, now and - "

"She doesn't have anything to worry about." Sternwood said firmly and I remained quiet for a moment.

"Because? She's getting terribly worked up, you see, because she doesn't know what's going on." I widened my eyes slightly, trying to appear as the epitome of a concerned friend and dutiful lady of the court as opposed to the names other people had decided to call me over the years.

Sternwood sighed, looking down at his boots for a moment and grinding his jaw. His silence conveyed more than any simple pleasantries ever could - this wasn't just some casual folly. This was serious.

"Sir Randell has been found dead." He said quietly and I held my breath in case I happened to miss a word. "He was found inside his chamber this morning and that's why the corridor has been closed."

Sir Randell. I hadn't had much communication with him but I would have been able to pick him out of a crowded room. He was a renowned soldier, as far as I knew. One of the best. Or he had been, at least. He was dead. The information didn't seem to be sinking in. It didn't seem real.

"How did he die?" I asked innocently, trying to disguise the deep-rooted curiousity in my voice.

"It was messy." Sternwood continued, his brows creasing. "But - "

"General!" That was Hestia, her rapid footsteps echoing against the stone walls. She was obviously growing frustrated at the fact that I was manipulating her investigation and imposing on her crime scene. I looked up and saw her standing on the threshold of the corridor, her eyes firm. "We have much to discuss, if you please."

Sternwood bowed slightly towards me before retreating. Hestia remained for a moment, her dark eyes boring into my head. She was only a small woman but she made every inch of her figure felt and any man who dared comment on her height would find themselves damned in the blink of an eye.

"Can you escort Lady Howard out, please. She shouldn't be here." Hestia ordered, turning on her heel and sweeping away towards where Caspian was stood.

So that was over.

The guards immediately approached me, the instruction to obey Hestia's every word clearly ingrained into their heads, their very being. They seized me by the forearms and urged me along; I struggled against their unyielding grip, their hands clamping like shackles down on my skin.

"You can let go of me, you know." One of the guards picked up the pace, his fingers digging painfully into the skin on my arm. I felt sure that these guards were receiving something out of Hestia's money pot - a normal guard wouldn't have carried out her instructions so...ruthlessly, no matter how seriously they had taken their training. They might belong to the general household cavalry but that didn't mean Hestia didn't have eyes everywhere and bribery didn't seem like something she'd abstain from. "What are you doing?"
"Gentlemen!" The guards immediately halted and turned on their heels at the sound of Caspian's voice echoing down the corridor and I yanked my arms from their hands, turning to see Caspian striding down the corridor, a firm yet unreadable expression on his face. "There is really no need to grab Lady Georgiana, she's perfectly capable of walking herself."

Thank you. At least someone around here wasn't so unfeeling. But then again, I knew that anyway.

I dropped into a deep curtsey, keeping my eyes pinned on to the stone floor, before turning and walking as calmly as I could away. My hands were beginning to feel numb and I didn't think it was a result of the cold or even the guard's tight grip against my arms.

Randell was dead. He had been killed. Messy didn't sound like it had been because of natural causes, either, and the look that Hestia had given me was enough to confirm all of that.

I knew that the guards would be watching me to ensure that I really did walk away and I didn't want to risk turning back in case they ordered me away again. But I -

I spotted Markus making his way leisurely down the corridor, a calm look on his face and I stormed towards him. I needed to speak to someone. I needed to vent. I needed to calm the shock that was fizzing in my stomach.

"What the - " I grasped Markus' elbow and steered him around, taking him back down the corridor and away from the hawk-like eyes of the guards.

"We need to talk. Now."

- So the plot thickens! What are your initial thoughts? Suspects? Motivations? Let me know!
Chapter 13

Lord Markus Howard

Georgie's words were swirling around in my head, fragmented and incomprehensible. I could see from her wide, earnest eyes that the words she were speaking were the truth but my mind was struggling to fully understand it. We were barely moving down the corridor because I was walking so slowly in an attempt to wrap my head around her words.

I'd woken early after having kicked my blankets off in the night, thus causing myself to become something of a human ice cube. I'd then been told by my manservant that that the corridor leading to the east wing had been closed and now Sir Randell was dead.

It didn't make sense.

I knew enough about the military hierarchy of the castle to know that he'd been one of the best swordsmen in the army, if not the best.

And now he was dead.

"How did it happen?" I asked, keeping my voice low. This wasn't the kind of thing that needed to be publicly announced.

Georgie shrugged, tucking some hair behind her ear. "Sternwood didn't say, other than it was messy." I locked my jaw.

"That doesn't sound good. We're ruling out natural causes, then?"
"Unless he drowned on his own vomit, it sounds like it."
"How did you manage to get Sternwood to talk?" I asked, managing to resume a regular walking pace as I repeated the words over and over in my head. Randell was dead. Randell was dead. Randell was dead.

"I said that Karinna was worried about why the corridor was closed."

"And that made him talk because apparently he's worried about her yet he can still somehow ignore her for days on end." Georgie let out a short sigh. I knew all about Karinna and her father's troubled history and tried my best, whenever I happened to be in Sternwood's company, to get closer to figuring out just exactly he acted the way he did.

"He might go and talk to her now..." I gave Georgie a hard look and she rolled her eyes. "Okay, maybe not."

He could barely find the time to go and visit her on a regular day, never mind a day when a prominent knight had been murdered.

I was still struggling to get my head around the information, even if I was pretending to have fully accepted it. From the sound of it, a soldier had been violently, senselessly murdered in his own chamber. He had been a brilliant soldier so, moving away from the shock, how had someone managed to actually physically kill him?

As I said, it didn't make sense. Or maybe it did; I hadn't seen the crime scene and doubted that I ever would to find the answer.
I didn't realise that Georgie was leading me over the edge of the corridor until my arm bumped against the window ledge.

"Do you really want to look out the window?" I asked her quizzically, as she peered over my shoulder and down the corridor. I furrowed my brows. "What are you doing?"

"We're being followed."
"What? By who?" I felt my hand drift towards my belt that was, of course, devoid of my sword. I hadn't exactly been thinking of arming myself on the way to find breakfast.

"I don't know, that's what I'm trying to find out."
"Could it be the killer?" I questioned because it was true - whenever someone died within the castle walls in a way that wasn't wholly normal people started to become panicked and paranoid. It seemed that I was one of them and it had only been five minutes. Georgie gave me a hard stare.

"The killer managed to sneak into Randell's chamber, kill him and sneak out again all while remaining unseen and not raising the alarm. They're not just going to come after someone in broad daylight - "

"So the killer is clever, sneaky, efficient." I rested my head on my palm as Georgie peered over my shoulder again and I the worried look cross her face, before disappearing as quickly as it had appeared.

"That doesn't sound like someone who's going to be particularly easy to catch. And, if Hestia had her way no one would ever know about it anyway - " I felt my eyes widen.

"Could it be Hestia?" The suggestion did sound slightly preposterous, even to my ears, but the more I thought about it the more plausible it seemed. "She's ruthless enough and she certainly has the resources..." Georgie bit her lip.

"It might be a crazy idea but I would have considered it if Randell had been killed in another way - poison or a freak hunting accident but not something messy. That doesn't seem like her style." I suddenly saw Georgie freeze, her hands gripping the window frame and her eyes growing wide.

"What?" Her look of horror morphed into one of smug amusement. "What?"

"We're currently being followed by two members of Hestia's personal guard. Battalion. Whatever she had to call them to allow Caspian to let her have her own private army."

It wasn't public knowledge that such a force existed but due to a lot of snooping around at balls and parades, Georgie and I had been able to compile a list of soldiers and guards who appeared to be much closer to Hestia than decorum should have allowed. It obviously didn't hurt to have as many eyes and hands available at court at your disposal but it also meant that the number of guards I'd invite to play cards with me had significantly dwindled.

"Why is she following me?"
"Not you. Me." Because of course Georgie got to have all the fun. "I was sticking my nose into where it wasn't wanted nor needed according to her, you should have seen her face when I was talking to Sternwood, and now she wants to make sure that I'm not trying to overthrow her, or something. As if I'd waste the energy..."

"Can I be seen with you, then?" I asked, cautious of the deep creasing of her brow. She was getting more invested into this feud with Hestia than I'd realised. "It might affect my reputation." Georgie rolled her eyes and I smirked. "Sorry. That was too soon."
"It's okay. I know I can slightly overreact sometimes." I raised a brow. Georgie was apologising for something? I hadn't even had to bribe her..."Shut up." She murmured with a smirk, clearly being able to read my expression.

"Are we going to stay by this window all day or not? I know it's a lovely window but - "

"Good morning Sir Dale, Sir Poretlli." Georgie dropped into a curtesy and I inclined my head as I offered my arm to her and we swept away. Georgie always had to have the upper hand. I was pretty sure not doing would bring her out in hives.

"I want to find Karinna." Georgie muttered. "In case Sternwood comes looking for her and she's no idea what he's talking about."

He wouldn't come looking for her. I knew as much as that.

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We soon found Karinna and had to re-tell the tale of just what was happening in the corridor leading to the east wing and also warning her of why her father could possibly come searching for her - even if I would bet my finest cloak on the prospect never even crossing his mind.

While I knew that we'd kept the matter of Sir Randell strictly between the three of us, I knew that by lunchtime the whole castle would be buzzing with the news. And then I would to turn to look at Estella and see just what her reaction was; a castle she had been lodging in for less than twenty four hours had already claimed its first victim. That certainly wouldn't look good for diplomacy and explained at least partly why Hestia had been so keen to keep the matter so contained.

"Do you think the hunt will still go ahead?" I pondered casually and I saw Georgie roll her eyes in Karinna's direction.

"I don't know." Georgie deadpanned.

"I hope so. I'd been looking forward to it."

"Of course you had," Georgie mumbled under her breath. "Someone's died. I don't think a hunt is going to be the first thing on anyone's agenda, apart from yours - "

"Randell loved hunts. We should hold it in his honor." Georgie was still looking disapprovingly at me but I ignored her. "What about you? Will you be joining us?"

"I don't know." Karinna admitted. The only reason Karinna would go would because her father probably wouldn't and Georgie would because...well...

"The only reason you want to go - and you do want to go," I started, nudging Georgie gently on the arm and grinning, "is because your three worst enemies will be there."

"What?"

"Me, Hestia and Lady Bertolini." Georgie rolled her eyes again and let out an audible groan. I felt my grin grow wider and Karinna was wearing a curious expression.

"I don't hate Lady Bertolini, you know - "

"Oh, you definitely hate Lady Bertolini and it's because she flirts with Caspian at every chance she gets." Georgie's pining feelings for the King had long since been an object of my amusement, no less because Georgie would become increasingly annoyed whenever I mentioned the subject. I could, on some level, completely understand because he was a very attractive man and if Georgie hadn't been so obsessed with him and he wasn't so clearly into women I might have given him a go.
Because a man ruling beside the King would go down so much more smoothly than the heiress of a tiny, fairly inconsequential kingdom.

"No, it's because she's arrogant and rude and treats her servants terribly." Georgie shot back, her tone firm. "Lysa told me that she sacked one of her maids when she found out that she was pregnant and when she ultimately lost her baby, she didn't let her have her old job back."

Okay, so maybe Bertolini was something of an old cow. But it was rather amusing, especially when I was a few goblets of wine into an evening, to watch her flutter around the King like a butterfly and judge Georgie's reactions accordingly.

"That's horrible." Karinna complained and I gave Georgie a smirk. There's absolutely no way Georgie could have heard about the story and not done something to help.

"I helped her get another job in the kitchen but anyway..."

"There we go." I grinned and Georgie playfully batted my arm. "The crisp air might do us all some good, however."

"I'm not that eager to freeze to death." Georgie complained and I remained silent as they drifted off into conversation about a particular book they both happened to have read recently.

I had been looking forward to the hunt, that was perfectly true, but all the appealing factors now seemed to pale in comparison to the heavy, all-consuming feeling that was sitting in my chest.

I wanted to get out. I wanted to feel the wind on my face and through my hair and the rush of adrenaline coursing through my veins. I wanted to be so in the moment, so engulfed by the thrill of the chase, that I couldn't think of anything else.

I wanted to get out of the castle. The walls felt like they were beginning to close in on me, crushing me, compressing me.

Randell's face was flashing in my mind.
Later that morning, Caspian called a council meeting with all the nobles in attendance to explain what was going on in the east wing of the castle. As I'd predicted, rumours and gossip had spread like wildfire and it seemed that everybody had a different idea of what had happened, without even being told the true cause.

A convincing gasp and look of wide-eyed horror had descended on the crowd once Caspian had revealed Randell had been found dead and I couldn't be quite sure what proportion was genuine shock and what was well-feigned.

I'd kept my eyes carefully on both Hestia and Estella whilst Caspian had been speaking, noting the way that Hestia had been wearing a particularly bitter expression as she stood at the fringes of the crowd. A chair had been erected for Estella and if she had been surprised by the whole affair, she certainly hadn't shown it. She seemed to be a master at concealing her true emotions, as were most of the Lakosians that I'd paid enough attention to, and I was beginning to wonder whether this was some kind of inherited trait or a consequence of their upbringing.

Caspian had asked for anyone with any information regarding Randell's whereabouts yesterday or with whom might possibly want him to come forward and had also insisted that they weren't going to let the perpetrator get away with what they'd done. The damage had been done, however, as people were already beginning to look worried at the prospect of a possible killer still being contained inside the castle. Caspian hadn't mentioned anything about the attack being personal or not, the start of a spree or otherwise, but he hadn't needed to.

That would just be another rumor, another whisper, that circulated its way through the court like a poison and then would slowly seep out into the villagers. The last time something like this had happened at court - that had been a mysterious illness that caused you to vomit and sleep and do little else - the panic had spread so quickly, I'd barely been able to comprehend it.

This could only be worse.

Randell was dead, after all, not simply puking his guts up into a chamber pot.

This was the very last thing that any of us needed, especially Caspian considering he was supposedly trying to make friends between the Narnians and the Lakosians. Now, there was contempt and blame from the Lakosians being aimed directly at us. It might not have started yet but I knew that soon, if the problem wasn't solved, people would start to turn on one another and the fights that break out will be far more vicious than the scuffle Markus found himself in.

That had been this morning and yet the atmosphere had seemed to calm considerably once Caspian had announced that the hunt would indeed go ahead as planned. This seemed to be a wise choice in not only reassuring people that the issue wasn't anything so detrimental that the hunt needed to be cancelled and would also give people a chance to brush off their worry and hopefully stem some of the gossip.

I was thinking optimistically and possibly overemphasizing the affect of a good hunt.

After dressing in a thicker gown - I knew it was going to be absolutely freezing - and eagerly eating lunch, I began to make my way towards the main courtyard where all the horses would be waiting
for their riders. All the reasons Markus had given for me attending the hunt were true but I had more specifically been thinking of the one that allowed me to spy on people, and who they interacted with, without their knowledge. This was partly for selfish reasons but also, well, you could never have too much information about who had it out for you.

Among the frantic bustling of the courtyard, I managed to find Tristan who had brought out my own horse as well as Caspian's. I felt sure Lysa had had some involvement in this, probably having worked up a grand scheme about how we'd meet and start up a conversation. Sadly, there was no sign of Caspian and after offering a hand to me as I mounted Dusk - I'd gone through a period of being an avid astrology student a few years ago - he slowly walked away, keeping tight hold of Caspian's horse's reins.

I scanned the crowd as I adjusted my feet and brushed some hair out of my face, the fierce wind having already yanked a couple of strands from my plait. I could see no sign of Markus or Karinna yet but that was really no surprise - it seemed as though the entirety of the castle was attending the hunt and I would have better chance of spotting them once we started the trek towards the woods.

I gritted my teeth slightly as I pulled my cloak tighter around myself, watching a group of Narnians lords swagger past in direction of their mounts. The competition and rivalry between the Narnians and Lakosians was going to be potent and I didn't want to get in the middle of it. Not that I wasn't competitive, quite the opposite really, but I'd never really found the join that seemingly came with shooting birds out of the sky.

Dusk bristled slightly as another horse pressed up against her in an attempt to get closer to the front of the procession and I calmly stroked her nose. I'd had Dusk for almost three years now, although it seemed like a lifetime, and in that time she definitely seemed to have picked up some elements of my character - she didn't particularly like other horses and could be annoyingly stubborn when she didn't get her way. I knew someone else like that...

I looked up as the movement around me froze for a moment before continuing. Caspian, Julien, Hestia and Estella made their way down the castle steps, Estella's hand carefully tucked into the crook of Caspian's elbow, and made their way towards their respective mounts. I somehow caught Caspian's eye as he passed me, nodding politely in my direction before helping Estella mount her exquisite black stallion.

He was simply being diplomatic. I'd seen him do that to every single one of the ladies, and most of the gentlemen too, at one point or another.

I felt an immediate surge of pity for Estella as Hestia, after mounting her brown mare, carefully maneuvered through the crowd until her horse was standing next to hers. Clearly, she'd been elected as the one best to keep Estella company for the what remained of the day. From my experience, Hestia wasn't the most charismatic of characters...and that was an understatement...

After a moment, the procession slowly began to spill out into the streets, the horses finding their natural order of hierarchy with the King and his most important advisors, lords and soldiers at the front and the lesser nobles bringing up the rear.

Myself and Markus were often shunned to the back of any official procession, unless I could manage to side up against Karinna who found herself in the middle of the procession. Sternwood, as we'd predicted, was staying inside the castle.

Tristan was lingering by the castle steps, seated on a rather tired looking horse that clearly hadn't been born for long treks through the woods, and he waved in my direction as my eyes landed upon him. He really was lovely and I couldn't really think of anybody who would be better for Lysa. Of
course, if he did end up hurting her in some way, then he would have to deal with me and the entire Wedgemore cavalry.

The Wedgemore cavalry wasn't exactly huge but that didn't matter.

I scanned the crowd again, searching the heads that were bobbing in front of me for any sign of Karinna or Markus. I sighed, my hands tightening around the reins as the lord next to me almost knocked me from my seat. His name was Lord Malcolm if I remembered correctly and, aside from being the proprietor of a fairly scrubby corner of land that produced poor-quality apples, he also happened to have a fondness for buxom, dark haired ladies according to Lady Sutherland.

I fell into that category, apparently. Creep.

I kept my eyes firmly on the crowd as I continued searching for sign of Markus or Karinna as I felt his eyes slowly scanning over my body in a way that I'd had to become accustomed to as I'd grown older and it had become apparent that I had more, shall we say, prominent features than that of some other ladies. That, and the fact that I rather liked my larger features and sometimes wanted to wear a dress with a low neckline because I thought it particularly flattered them and made myself feel more confident. Men usually either found this off-putting, because a lady being comfortable in her own skin obviously didn't appeal to them, or enticed them even further, which led to fierce conversations on my part telling them to back the hell off.

I glared at Malcolm from out the corner of my eye as he focused on the people in front of him, as though he hadn't just been starring at me like I was a hunk of ham and he'd been denied substance for years. He could piss off right now.

Today was going to be so fun. I could already sense it.

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We soon reached the outskirts of the forest and while most of the ladies drifted over to where a series of tents had been erected where you could sit and be served refreshments, the vast majority of the men headed directly for the woods, already reaching for their arrows.

I found myself sat in one of the tents with Karinna, who I'd eventually found, sipping on mulled wine and trying not to complain about the temperature. I was jealous of the men for at least one reason - I doubted that they would slowly be freezing to death. They were probably riding high on the back of their latest kill.

"I'm going to have to go and ride around in a minute." I complained, swallowing down the rest of my wine even though it did little to warm my insides. I turned my head at the sound of cackling laughter - Bertolini was sat a few feet away from me wearing one of the most beautiful pink gowns that I'd ever seen. I hadn't been able to find her in the crowd because she'd managed to push her way to the front of the procession, definitely not in order to be closer to Caspian.

She was nothing if not persistent, even if she was something of a cow.

"How are you feeling?" I asked, turning back to Karinna as I flexed my gloved hands.

"I'm fine."

"Really?" In her pale blue gown, Karinna looked every part the ice goddess that rumor made her out to be. But she really did keep everything to herself and while I knew that this was a direct result of her upbringing, I earnestly wished that she wouldn't. I wanted her to talk to me as freely as I talked to her. I wanted to be able to help her before her problems reached breaking point, not as and when.
"Father came to talk to me." She said after a moment and I hid my surprise. Had he really? "Asking how worried I was." I bit my lip as Karinna smirked slightly, turning her head to look towards the expanse of spidery black trees that were mostly void of leaves that stretched out in front of us.

"And how did that go?" Karinna shrugged.

"He asked how I was; he explained that he had everything under control and that I didn't have anything to panic about. I suggested that we could on a ride together, sometime."

"That's progress." I said with a smile, knowing that it really was. For Karinna to take action in the way she had was something I hadn't been expecting. "Really. It's progress."

Karinna didn't seem to be convinced as she started picking at her nails. She would admit that there was a problem in her relationship with her father but would never accept any responsibility for what was going on. She was hardly helping the situation by hiding away in the library.

This fragmentation of her relationship with her father had started the day her mother died. I'd had time to become accustomed to my mother's death - her illness had grown worse after a period of months and whilst it was still awfully hard sometimes, we'd had time to process what was happening in our heads. Karinna hadn't had that. Her life had changed in the space of a minute; one freak riding accident had been all that was needed to wipe her from their lives.

"I think he's still trying to figure out how to move on after your mother's death." I said slowly, carefully watching Karinna's face. I could rant and complain at Sternwood all I liked, he certainly wasn't the perfect father by any stretch of the imagination, but I couldn't deny the fact that he was still clearly grieving the loss of his wife and the only way that he was able to make it through the day was to bury his head into his work.

"I moved on." Karinna said, a bitter edge to her voice and I frowned. 'Moved on' implied forgotten and I didn't have to think very hard about remembering the last time Karinna had curled up in my arms, sobbing and wanting to scream about how much she missed her mother. Karinna might have handled the situation better than Sternwood but she most certainly had not moved on.

"He's obviously finding it harder to process. But that doesn't mean he doesn't care." I might curse Sternwood's name most of the time but if he genuinely didn't care about her then there was no way my ruse about Karinna being worried in order to gain information about Randell would have worked. No way.

"Maybe."

"He cares, Karinna. I promise he does. I know it."

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A couple of hours later and the birds residing in the woods could breathe a sigh of relief because the hunt was officially over and now, everyone was enjoying a leisurely ride through the trees to admire the almost spectral scenery. I, for one, wanted to skip the peaceful walk and return to the castle because I felt sure that I couldn't be the only person feeling the sting of the wind against their skin. I didn't care about how effective the cool chill was in preventing my migraines; if we remained in the woods much longer, I was sure my muscles would cease to move properly.

I'd managed to catch a few words with Markus once the gentlemen had returned from the woods, triumphant looks on their faces, and it seemed he had managed to strike up a peculiar rivalry with a group of nobles that I wasn't sure he had ever spoken to before and was fairly certain had spoken out against his bedroom habits. He hadn't headed my words, however, because after gulping down a tankard of mead, he'd returned to his mount and had trotted away.
Typical.

When he was surrounded by the grunting, alpha-male types that littered the higher ranks of the military, Markus almost became a different person. It was though he felt he needed to prove just how masculine he was to them; they’d all been drinking mead, so that meant Markus had to, even though I knew he couldn’t stand the stuff.

I ducked under a low branch, the leaves tickling my back and sending another chill down my spine. Up ahead, I could see that Caspian was fully engaged in his diplomatic duties, surrounded by his advisors, as Estella had been handed from Hestia and now to him to entertain.

I, on the other hand, was trying very hard not to get knocked from my horse. Rather than the mostly orderly line that we’d formed on our journey to the woods, it now seemed to be a complete free for all as the crowds jostled in an attempt to get closer to the King and important nobles who took up the front of the procession.

It was pathetic, really. There were much easier ways to gain the King’s attention that didn’t involve the possibility of being thrown from the saddle and landing in a shrub. I preferred to admire from a glance.

"What do you think - " I turned my head and instantly narrowed my eyes. Only moments ago Karinna had been riding next to me and now, there was no sign of her. I turned to look behind me, scanning over the tail end of the procession as other lords passed me, hissing under their breaths for me to get out of their way.

Charming.

But where was Karinna?

I knew that, while she was a capable horsewoman, she didn’t particularly enjoy the activity and it didn’t take a great amount of intellectual ability to figure out why - her mother had died in a riding accident and she didn’t want to duplicate the incident.

I scanned the crowd again as the final stragglers passed me, turning my attention to the middle half of the procession as it snaked around a corner. Perhaps I had been too busy thinking about how bitterly cold I was to notice that Karinna had moved up ahead of me?

But no. She was gone.

The panic and nausea were bubbling up in my stomach. The trees were beginning to blur together as I desperately scanned them, searching for any sign of her or her mount or -

"Karinna" I was screaming, my voice a shard of ice breaking through the civilized backdrop of what was going on in front of me, heads turning and brows furrowing and voices whispering through the crowd at just what was I doing and who I thought I was. "Karinna!"

As if shouting her name would bring her back. As if shouting her name would do anything at all other than cause people to shake their heads at me and frown at my clothes. I didn’t care. They could look at me all they wanted. Karinna had gone missing. I wasn’t hallucinating like I did when my migraines were at their very worst. She was gone.

Markus thundered over to me from somewhere in the crowd as I frantically looked around, craning my neck to examine every inch of the woods that I could see but the trees were dense and tightly packed, the gloomy light of late afternoon coating them in a dark shadow.

"What's wrong?" Markus asked as he slowed his mount to a walk, just as Caspian approached from
the front of the procession. I could feel the panic beginning to set in throughout the rest of my body, the unsteadiness of my hands, the sharpness of my breathing, the clamminess of my hands and my skin.

"Karinna's gone missing. I don't - I don't know where she is." I sounded as though I was panting, my voice no more than a strained whisper as I squeezed my eyes shut. I needed to get a grip of myself; I was behaving like a coward and a fool.

Within a second, Caspian was barking orders for the soldiers to split up, to search every inch of the woods from this center point for any sign of her or her mount, his voice clear and warm amongst the cold. I focused my eyes on a snowdrop that was peaking through a pile of moss on the ground; someone had told me a long time ago that whenever she felt like the world was slipping from her grip, that she was no longer in control of herself, to focus on something very small and build outwards.

Karinna was fine. She was fine. Fine.

"You need to calm down." Markus said firmly but I was barely listening. I kept my eyes honed onto the snowdrop, the shouts and gusts of wind rushing through my head without leaving any impact, without making any impression. I -

I looked up, clenching my hands around the reins that had been slipping through my gaze. I would have thought I had imagined it but judging from the looks on Markus and Caspian's faces, I knew that I wasn't. There was a scream.

A female scream.

I kicked Dusk's flank, storming off the path and into the jungle of thick grass and low branches and sharp thorns that pricked at my arms as I pushed through the vegetation. I could hear the thud of hooves behind me but I didn't turn to see who it was as I pushed away a thick, low-lying branch.

If Karinna had been hurt, in any way, then I was going to kill somebody.

I burst into a sort of clearing and I could have cried with relief. Karinna was sprawled out on her front, clutching at her ankle and panting, her hair completely pulled from its bun. Her mount was no where to be seen.

Thank God. She was okay.

"What happened?"

"Something must of scared her because she just saw something and bolted." Karinna explained as I jumped from the saddle and hurried over to her. "I don't know whether it was a snake or a bird or what but I fell and - "

I didn't speak for a moment, helping her to sit up. I was going to kill that horse when I got my hands on her.

"Where's your horse now?"

"I don't know. I was concentrating on not breaking my neck or my back. Or both." I looked up at the sound of hooves; Caspian entered the clearing and quickly leaped from the saddle, striding towards us. I let him help her, ask her how she was, whether she was hurt. I was trying to brush off the shaking feeling in my hands and my voice.
I was never normally like this. It must have been a mix of my panic for Karinna and the uneasiness of what had happened with Randell and the unexpected arrival of the Lakosians and the added pressures of the cold. I needed to snap out of it. Karinna was fine, perfect even.

Caspian took a step backwards for a moment, commanding his men to start searching for Karinna's horse.

"You can ride on Dusk with me." I said slowly, steadying my voice as much as I could. "Can you stand?" She took my hand and pulled herself to her feet, immediately wincing as she put pressure onto her right foot.

"That's a no, then." Caspian said, reaching for her arms to steady her as she nearly collapsed into his arms. "Do you mind?"

Caspian scooped Karinna up into his arms, one under her knees and the other cupping her back, and carefully seated her onto the back of Dusk before holding the reins as I clambered up myself. I couldn't afford to feel shaky now. I had three lives resting in the balance.

"Thank you." Karinna murmured as I felt her arms tighten around my torso.

"No problem." Caspian replied with a smile, gently brushing Dusk on the nose as he passed me the reins. Our fingers brushed slightly as he did so, his slight rush of warmth thawing the chill, even through the leather of my gloves. I needed to get back to the castle and have a nice, long lie down. "I'm just glad you're alright. And we'll find your horse, I promise."

What I needed to do was to stop being such a coward; Karinna was fine. I didn't have to start shaking every time something happened to me. People already doubted my capabilities enough.

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We rode in silence for a while as the procession slowly began to snake back towards the castle. The feeling of Karinna's hands around my waist, the pressure of her head against my shoulder was comforting as I navigated through the unearthed tree roots and rabbit warrens.

Karinna hadn't spoken to me since Caspian has entered the clearing. She was probably feeling as shaken up as I was. The day her mother had been killed was probably replaying before her eyes.

"It's not fair, you know." I murmured, pushing through my unease. I needed to do something to cheer Karinna up. "I want to be carried."

"Are you jealous?" Karinna muttered, her voice near to my ear, the smirk clear in her voice.

"Very. I'm going to hurt my ankle now and see what he does to help me."

- Who do you think the mysterious woman giving Georgie advice is? And what do you think about her seemingly perfect façade having what look to be fairly sizable cracks?
Chapter 15

Tristan Halbrook

The hunting party quickly returned to the castle, with evening beginning to draw in and the temperate set to plummet even further. I hadn't fallen from the saddle once and every member of the hunting party returned which set the whole thing as a complete success, was a surprise when you considered the slightly perilous conditions and the unease that had settled down on everyone given the morning's news. No one had died, which couldn't be said for all the hunting trips that I'd ever been forced to attend.

Or they had, I suppose, when I thought about.

Sir Randell should have gone out, probably boasting about having the most kills which was what he usually did. There had been none of that today. I was still trying to wrap my head around the fact that he'd been found dead, killed in his own chamber with a pair of guards standing merely five feet away in the corridor outside. I knew the unfortunate servant who'd been the one who found him; he had barely spoken all day and by the time I returned from the hunting trip, he was still as white as a sheet and refusing to really speak to anyone.

Still. We couldn't spend any more time loitering around and hoping that he'd say something or Mrs. Boweson would have our heads. He'd say something in his own time when he was ready.

Once I'd returned the King's horse to the stables I went back to the kitchens and fetched the King's dinner to take to his chambers. I was hoping I wouldn't have to stay long - I'd completed a lot of my chores in the morning when the rest of the castle had seemed to be temporarily frozen at the news of Sir Randell - because while I'd been gathering the King's dinner I'd been told by one of Lysa's fellow maids that her mother had given birth to a baby girl and I was now eager to go and meet her.

I sometimes, even though it could seem rather selfish sometimes, used Lysa's siblings as a substitute for my own. I was an only child and while I loved and adored my parents with my entire being, I did sometimes think about what my life would have been like if I had had siblings growing up. My parents ended up working dreadfully long hours and I could get somewhat lonely sometimes when I was cooped up inside the house by myself. If I had siblings then this wouldn't be the case...

But I had Lysa and she was more than enough for me and I got to bond with her family the way I couldn't with my own. Now, I had another sister for me to dote upon.

I weaved past a group of servants on the stairs and turned down the corridor leading to the King's chambers, passing the guards that stood watch at the foot of it. One of the cooks had informed me that the King had already eaten dinner alongside Queen Estella and the rest of his advisors but I'd wanted to bring something up regardless - I couldn't be sure as to how much he'd actually eaten. His plate had been returned still littered with food and while I was sure some of the maids had been picking at his leftovers, I felt sure he would still be rather hungry.

He'd probably spent the entirety of the meal trying not to let diplomatic relations fray even more than they had done as a result of Sir Randell's death and ensuring that Queen Estella didn't decide to invade, all the while making sure the Duchess of Irvington didn't bite his head off. That was what I would have been worrying about; the Duchess scared me more than the King did. But, then again, that was probably because I'd been his manservant for almost a year now and had seen what he looked like first thing in the morning, which wasn't particularly threatening.
More...disheveled.

I paused outside the door, smiling slightly at the two guards who always stood outside and after carefully transferring the platter of food onto my right hand, knocked on the door with my left. I'd perfected the skill of holding a platter in just one hand - I'd had to, or there would have been an awful lot more food on the floor and Cook would have skinned me for making her buy more ingredients for the kitchen.

There was a muffled "come in" from behind the door so I carefully turned the door handle and pushed the door open, quickly noticing that the King wasn't alone and that Lord Julien was sat opposite him, his fingers poised to move a pawn across the chess board. Chess seemed to be one of Lord Julien's favourite activities and I'd yet to witness a match that the King had actually won that didn't involve some element of cheating, whether that be alcohol or another form of distraction.

The King's chambers were undoubtedly the largest set of rooms in the castle, naturally, with a large living and dining area leading up to another door which led to his bed chamber. The whole room was decorated in muted creams, blues and greens with touches of gold that I had to remember to polish even after the maids had been inside because they always missed a spot. Lord Julien was almost as common a fixture as any candelabra or pillow that I had to arrange and it was clear, judging from the decanter of wine that was poised between them, the conversation that I'd missed had been rather heavy.

That wasn't hard to understand. A man had died less than twelve hours ago.

I liked Lord Julien a awful lot more than some of the other nobles that frequented the King's chambers and I felt sorry that people were wary of him because of his mother's position. Even if he did rarely smile, he'd always been perfectly pleasant with me.

"I brought you some food, your Majesty. I thought you might be hungry."

"Thank you." The King said, looking up from his chess game for a moment before gesturing to the grand dining table behind me. "I'll get at it later."

I carefully laid the silver platter down on the wood; after all, I was the one who would have to polish the table if any scratches managed to rub off on it.

"Would you mind building the fire up? It's beginning to get cold." The room was already lit in a warm golden light from the various candles that had been lit around the room but the unmistakable chill in the air was clear. The thick stone walls of the castle didn't help in insulating any of the rooms, if anything they made everything more draughty.

I kneeled down at the foot of the ornate fireplace, the tiles circling the hearth decorated with pictures showcasing some of the stories from Narnia's history. Of course, there were several depicting the Kings and Queens of Old that the King had spent time with.

"How am I doing then? In your expert opinion?" I was a familiar enough face now for the King to feel comfortable to talk about his private matters whilst I was still in the room and trust that I wouldn't go spreading secrets and gossip around the place. I knew that if I did, I would probably find myself in the stocks by the morning. That was what some of the grooms said, anyway.

"You're doing fine. You need to stop panicking." Lord Julien assured as I carefully arranged the logs of wood among the hearth and tried not to blow the charred ashes out onto the marble floor. "You need to stop caring about what old Lord Monkton is saying and do what you feel is right."
There was a pause before a light tap on a wooden surface and a sigh. It seemed Lord Julien was well on his way to winning yet another chess game.

"But I have to listen to him, and the others. They know just as well as me what's at stake here. And they're the reason that I'm even in this position in the first place." I tried to be as quick as I possibly could building the fire but I knew that if the Duchess knew how many private conversations I'd been privy to then I would have my own battalion of soldiers tracking my every move as well as Georgie and Markus. Lysa had told me how Georgie had suspected the Duchess had sent some of her men to spy on them and I didn't discount this for a second. The Duchess had eyes everywhere.

"Well, you can listen to me." Lord Julien continued, his voice firm yet friendly. "If you marry Estella, then I'll never speak to you again." I hadn't had any personal interaction with the Queen but I'd heard enough stories from the other servants to tide me over for now. Some of them loathed her; some of them seemed to worship her.

"She's not that bad."

"No, she's not. But I've yet to see anything that the two of you actually have in common aside from both wearing a crown. She might be beautiful and intelligent but I don't think you'd be happy with her. You need to focus on making friends with her, not life partners, and secure another ally." It was obvious was Lord Julien was a part of the King's advisory committee and why he was among the King's closest friends.

"I need to get you to write all my speeches." The King joked, the trickle of liquid breaking the silence as one of them refilled their glass. "And if you could, tell your mother to stop being..."

"Like my mother?"

"Yes." The King chuckled as I reached for more firewood. I didn't want the fire to burn out too quickly before it had time to fully warm the room. "Thank you."

"I'll try. And I meant to ask you earlier but I got side-tracked, what exactly happened with Lady Karinna? Mother wouldn't let me through."

"Her horse got spooked and bolted off the path." The King explained, "Lady Georgiana started panicking and she was thrown from the saddle but aside from some bruises she should make a full recovery."

"How convenient that the beautiful Lady Georgiana was in distress and you were able to help her?" Lord Julien teased, the grin evident in his voice.

"We're not having this discussion."

"What discussion?"

"If you want to have that discussion - " The King paused for a moment, clearly considering his next move, "then we can have the discussion about how you didn't take your eyes off Lady Karinna for so much as a second during the ball. Hmm?"

It was easy to forget that the men sat in the room with me were the King and a Marquis because they talked the way my friends did when a new kitchen maid started. I didn't know whether their teasing actually meant anything, whether there was true feeling hidden behind their words, or if it really was nothing more than teasing but considering I shouldn't have really heard the conversation in the first place, I didn't matter.
Because if it was true, I couldn't even imagine how happy Georgie would be.

"The fire is built up, sire." I said, rising from my knees and wiping the black dust onto my dark breeches.

"Thank you." The King looked at me for a moment, before looking over at Lord Julien then back towards me. "Perhaps we should ask the only man in the room who has a stable, or even existing, relationship what I should do. How is Miss Carker?"

"She's great." That was another reason why I would never feel scared of the King the way I felt towards the Duchess. He always asked me how I was and how Lysa and my parents were. Other nobles didn't even care about my name, as long as poured them their wine and stayed out of their way. "Her mother's just given birth again. To a little girl."

"You must send Mrs. Carker my congratulations." He beamed, genuine interest showing in his eyes.

"I'm going to go and see her when I've finished work but..."

"Then your work tonight is done. You should go and be with her family - "

"Are you sure, sire? Do you not want me to fetch me some more wine?" I didn't have to hide my sarcasm around him, either, in fact, he seemed to enjoy it.

"No, thank you. You should be with the people that you care about. And I don't think Lord Monkton would approve if we turned up to tomorrow's security meeting drunk and unable to walk in a straight line."

The subtext was clear - the meeting would be about Sir Randell and if the investigating solders had managed to find out any of the answers to their questions. That would be a cheery morning meeting.

"Good night then, your Majesty, milord."

"Good night Tristan."

I didn't need to think about Sir Randell tonight. I needed to focus on the things that I was thankful for and relish those happy moments where I could surround myself with the people that I loved because you never knew when they could be snatched away from you.
Chapter 16

Lady Georgiana Howard

- There's some gory description in this one, it is quite short however, so just be careful...

Before I even opened my eyes, I could feel the sharp throbbing emanating from somewhere in the back of my skull and leeching down into my neck and out through my eyes. It felt as though someone was attempting to pick away at my brain with a scalpel, causing me to wince as a sudden stab of pain shot through my head as I rolled onto my back and pulled my feet up towards my body. I could sense the cold that was lingering in the air that no number of blankets was going to protect me from; the chill that had burrowed itself into my brain and was freezing my head from the inside out.

I peeled my eyes open slightly, faint streams of watery sunlight escaping through the bottom of the curtains, and I was forced to shut them again as black shadows started to dance before them.

Today, it seemed, was to be a migraine day. The concoction of the cold weather, the somewhat vigorous exercise I completed yesterday and the stress of the last forty-eight hours had finally caught up with me. Not that that was unusual in any sense; I could barely go one month without having a day where I was at least semi-incapacitated.

I forced my eyes open again, cringing back against the light and trying to ignore the pain that was intensifying with every second that I held my eyes open. My vision was blurred and un-clear in the semi-darkness of the room, the faint silhouette of my rose poised on my dining table staring back at me. I squinted, the image becoming a little clearer. From what I could see, none of the petals had crumpled onto the table nor had the vivid red-pink faded to a translucent grey or dull brown.

I let me head loll back against my pillows, scrunching my eyes shut and feeling a wash of relief before the action of closing my eyes so tightly sent shockwaves shooting through my head. My rose hadn't crumpled into dust and that must mean I was going to be fine, even if every move I made sent some kind of pain ricocheting through my bones.

I slowly reached my hands up to my face, tugging the hair from off my face and gently running my hands through it, my fingers snagging against the knots. I then pressed my fingers to the temples of my face, a technique one of the doctors had told me might help to relieve some of the pain. I'd yet to find it effective.

I pulled my fingers away at the feel of something cool and sticky coating my skin. Had I been sweating during the night? Had I succumbed to another nightmare and yet had no recollection of it?

I slowly opened one eye, examining my fingers in the dim light. Was I hallucinating? It wouldn't have been the first time I had in the midst of a migraine. My fingers looked to be coated in a thick, silver substance, the droplets trickling down my fingers and onto my knuckles. I watched the substance sink into the rivulets of my skin, something in the substance making it look to be sparkling in the light.

More of the liquid suddenly splattered down onto my fingers, coating my fingernails. I paused my examination, a sudden lump forming in my throat and a deep feeling of unease building in the pit of my stomach. The substance looked like molten silver, rich and viscous. The throbbing in my head was intensifying, along with my dread.
Another droplet splattered onto my skin, this time onto my wrist and slowly began running down my forearm, leaving a path of silver residue in its wake.

I closed my eyes for a moment before opening them again. The substance was still coating my fingers, my wrist, as more splattered down onto my palm. I took a deep breath before tilting my eyes up to the roof of my four-poster bed, the action sending a jarring sensation to ripple behind my eyes.

I screamed, the echoing sound reverberating around my skull.

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The events that followed were a jumble of hazy voices, faces and movements, all incessantly dulled by the throbbing behind my eyes. I’d left my bed - whether of my own volition or pulled by a semi-scandalized guard after seeing me in my nightclothes I didn't know - and had ended up sat on one of my dining room chairs with my dressing gown having been hastily thrown over my shoulders and doing nothing to soften the chill that had settled down into my bones.

The two guards were now lingering by the door, restlessly pacing and keeping their eyes fixed on the bed. The wide-eyed panic was clear in their gazes; their training had not prepared them for this sort of eventuality. I let my own eyes wonder over to my bed, from where I’d kept them pinned into the door because the pain in my head intensified whenever I quickly moved my eyes, and felt the wave of nausea wash over me again. I was surprised that I had vomited all over the bedsheets after what I’d seen.

An animal that I'd only ever seen and read about in books, the unicorn was famed and protected in every language and culture across the world for the healing properties that its blood provided and the ancient magic that existed under its skin.

Someone had found one, brutally executed it and strapped its poor, brutalized head to my bed frame. Its eyes had been gouged out too, the empty flesh torn and marred by the blade of a knife. Mercifully, its horn was still attached yet I wasn't sure what magical properties it would contain now - it all depended on how long it had been since the animal had been slaughtered.

The substance that had been dripping onto my hands, and onto my face and hair whilst I'd slept, was unicorn blood. My hands were dripping in it and the silver colouring didn't make the barbarity any easier to bear. Killing a unicorn was a sin in every culture that I'd ever read about and yet someone had done that; someone had caused the brutal scarring across its eyes, the jagged knife marks that had severed its head from its body, the silver blood that had once been pouring from its eyes and its neck and splattering onto my skin, my bedsheets.

I had tried rubbing the blood off but it had dried firm against my skin.

The image of its soft, white fur coated in its own blood, the empty eye sockets and the pain and agony that was clear on its face was something that had bored its way into my mind, my very soul, and would remain for the rest of my life.

To kill a unicorn was considered to be of the same magnitude of killing a monarch. And now I had its blood, effectively a monarch's blood, on my hands and in my hair.

I would have started crying if I didn't feel so numb.

Someone had entered into my room in the middle of the night and spent time tying its butchered head to the frame of my bed; the rope had been looped around countless times to hold the head in place and that would have taken a considerable amount of time and effort.
I had just been sleeping. I'd slept through it all...

The door to my chamber flew open, rattling off the stone wall and making the guards almost jump out of their skins and clutch their swords which I hadn't realised they were armed with. The sharp noise sent waves of pain shooting through my eyes and as soon as I caught sight of Hestia glowering in the doorway, still dressed in her night clothes and dressing gown, I wished I really had curled up onto the table and returned to the peaceful abyss of sleep.

I couldn't understand what was going on anymore. The pain was numbing.

Hestia squinted towards me for a moment, undoubtedly noticing the pitiful state of my appearance, before turning towards the two guards at my bed frame. If she was shocked at what she saw then she didn't show this on her face. She had to be shocked, though, because the butchering of a unicorn was not an everyday occurrence.

Something warm suddenly gripped my hand and I slowly turned my head, carefully blinking against the light shining through the now open door. I hadn't seen that Caspian had also arrived with Hestia, a slightly more formal shirt thrown on than the one he slept with though his hair still looked rather unkempt, and was now gently holding my hand, a worried frown on his face. Had he been speaking to me? I hadn't heard.

"Are you okay? Were you harmed?" He presumably repeated and I allowed myself to focus on the warmth of his skin as he gripped my hand rather than noise of steel sawing through rope that I could hear coming from behind me.

"No." I said swallowing, my voice croaky.

"Was anything taken?" Caspian continued, the frown on his face softening slightly but his lips were still pressed into a tight line.

"I don't know what you mean." I slowly stuttered, reaching to pull my dressing gown tighter around myself as a chill blew through the open door. His words seemed foggy, meaningless as I ingested them. My migraines weren't usually so debilitating that I was unable to comprehend people's words and understand situations.

"When somebody entered your room last night, did they take anything with them?" Caspian rephrased, his eyes gentle as he scanned over my face. I hadn't even thought about that; I had been too consumed by the shock and the pain to begin to think about a possible thief.

"I haven't looked." I answered honestly. I wanted to look Caspian straight in the eye as I spoke but I knew the action would send another wave of pain shooting through me, so instead focused on a spot just above his mouth. If he thought I was behaving impertinently or just strangely then he didn't say and I watched as Hestia suddenly called out his name and ushered him over to my bed, engaging him in furious conversation. His eyes drifted over to me a few times, his eyes narrowing slightly before they relaxed and he nodded.

They were talking about me - Hestia was undoubtedly informing him of my condition - but I didn't care. All I wanted was for the guards to leave, everybody to leave, so that I could fall back into bed and sleep for a long while.

Something was pushed into my hand and I blinked to see Caspian sitting in front of me again, a goblet of water poured from the jug. Fluids didn't seem to make the symptoms better or worse.

"Is there anything I can do?" He asked softly as my hands clutched around the cold metal of the
goblet. He looked so sincere, so cordial, that I felt slightly guilty at revealing the truth.

"No. I just have to wait for them to pass, sadly." I said, forcing something of a smile onto my face but this didn't seem to reassure him. He might have possibly wondered why I would sometimes disappear for a day at a time but now he knew the true reason and that made me feel strangely vulnerable.

"Would you like me to fetch the doctor?" I was fairly sure the doctors were sick of seeing me; I'd swallowed every single one of the foul-tasting concoctions that they'd forced down my throat and none of them had had offered any kind of long-term relief.

"I'll be okay. Thank you, though."

"Do you take any sleeping draughts, Lady Howard?" Hestia suddenly approached me, her sharp eyes narrow. I was not in the mood to be dealing with any of her pettiness or cold-hearted ambition at the moment. If I could have walked out of the room and known that I wouldn't collapse, I would have.

"No." I had in the past because they had allowed me to grasp some hours of sleep when the pain was particularly harsh but I never felt easy with the fact I was leaving myself utterly defenseless and vulnerable to anyone who could enter my chamber.

"Are you sure?" She repeated, her tone still sharp.

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Because I'm struggling to see how somebody could have entered your chamber in the middle of the night without your knowledge and done this. I caught her slight exaggeration on the 'without your knowledge' part. Did she honestly think I would have aided someone in an act like this? I would have assisted someone in brutality and slaughter?"

"I don't know." I answered finally, squeezing my eyes shut as Caspian's chair scraped across the concrete floor as he pushed it backwards to stand. The room was beginning to spin slightly, the image before my eyes wobbling slightly off-axel as I concentrated on a single spot - a small crack on the wood of the dining table and Caspian's hand that was resting next to it. I'd always liked his hands but that didn't seem to be important right now.

"Georgie? Georgie?" That was Lysa's voice. I'd be able to identify her voice anywhere. I slowly peeled my eyes to the doorframe, pushing through the pain. Her hair had been hurriedly thrown up into a knot at the top of her head, the bright red flashing through my vision, and her expression was grave with her light eyes wide with worry.

"Is it a really bad one?" She was able to read my expressions by now and could see when I was most strongly in the depths of a migraine.

I felt myself saying yes, hating this admission of weakness and vulnerability. The flash of red hair disappeared, Lysa took off down the corridor in search of the nearest doctor or healer as I blinked again.

"I thought you said you didn't need a doctor?" Caspian joked warmly, his face still tense despite his words. I kept my eyes focused on his hand, the callouses coating his knuckles, the tan shade of his skin, his elegantly long fingers. I followed her advice of focusing onto the small details more than I cared to admit, especially when it hurt to physically move my eyes.

I should have been able to think of a reply, something witty and charming but I couldn't. I was
beginning to feel light-headed as though I was slowly suffocating with my brain starved of oxygen and the world in front of me suddenly began to tip but I didn't have the energy to care.

I could someone shouting something that sounded like my name as a wall slammed into the side of my face, throbbing pain ricocheting down my entire body. There was a light, warm pressure cupping my face, feeling my forehead, holding my wrist and smoothing down my back.

My vision was blank. The only thing I could feel was the sharp, throbbing pain and the anguish of that poor, butchered animal.

- Poor Georgie! How do you think her relationships are going to develop? And what's going on with the plot?
Chapter 17

Lady Karinna Sternwood

I gently eased the door to my chamber closed, only letting out a breath when I released the handle. It was barely 9 in the morning and yet I felt as though I had been awake for hours, given what had happened. Georgie was now resting in my chamber, given as her own was currently occupied by half a dozen uniformed guards and the butchered head of a unicorn, with one of the doctors and Lysa regularly checking on her, seeing that she'd passed out less than half an hour before. I would have stayed, I wanted to stay, but the doctor had insisted that too many people being in the room would only distress and agitate her further.

Lysa had quickly informed me of just what the hell was going on as soon as I'd made my way over to her chamber after hearing from some servants that there seemed to be some commotion coming from the corridor where Georgie's chamber was located. I still couldn't quite believe that somebody would perform such a deed and much less that Georgie would be on the receiving end.

The guards had been trying to cut the head down for over an hour now and were making minimal progress; whoever the perpetrator was, they had used an inordinate amount of rope. I had only been able to stand in her chamber for a moment - there had then been a barricade of guards removing anyone from the room - but those few seconds had been enough to make me feel nauseous. I could only imagine how Georgie had felt seeing that first thing in the morning whilst being consumed by a migraine.

I also knew that she would be heartbroken to know that the time the King had actually carried her from her chamber to mine she had been unconscious so couldn't even relish the experience.

The King, Hestia and Father were still inside her chamber looking for any clues that could lead them to finding the identity of the perpetrator but there was one clue that I'd seen that I wanted to look into now. I took off down the corridor, swiftly passing the groups of mumbling servants and noble ladies that were huddling in the cloaks in an attempt to keep warm. I knew this particular path so well that I felt sure I would be able to make my way to the library blindfolded by now.

I knew that what I'd seen might have been nothing, merely a decorative design added by the craftsman, but I wanted to be sure before I either cast it from my mind or informed someone of the significance of what I'd seen.

In the few seconds that I'd been able to squeeze into Georgie's chamber, I spotted some kind of small symbol that had been carved into one of the bedposts and not the other. I could simply be the craftsman's mark to identify his work but it was one that I'd never seen before, and yet it did seem strangely familiar. It was small enough so not to be picked out by any wandering gazes and there was some feeling in the back of my head telling me that I'd seen it before.

I couldn't remember exactly where, however, and that was bothering me; hence, I was heading for the place I always went to whenever I didn't know something. The library.

***

I had been in the library for a handful of hours and had managed to accumulate a towering stack of books that were now piled in front of me. I was trying to make sense of all the information that I'd read about, the theories and histories and mythologies swirling around in my mind, and just how exactly it related to Georgie.

Someone had butchered a unicorn, tied its head to Georgie's bedpost and then carved an ancient
wheel symbol into her bedpost.

I knew that I'd seen the symbol somewhere before; it was widely used among most mythology to signify the three stages of the goddess - the maiden, the mother and the crone. It was sometimes used to represent great power and knowledge as well as the cycle of life. In this sense, Georgie would be classified as the maiden but it made no sense as to why somebody would waste their time and effort into carving it.

I knew that there were a multitude of different religious and spiritual beliefs that merged together to form Narnian culture and it could be somebody trying to stir up religious hatred or to some sort of panic, which was exactly what some of the more unsavory rumours were saying about the Lakosians.

I didn't think they even had unicorns, however, and it would take an experienced hunter to be able to track and kill one, as well as having the correct motivations. And surely if someone was going to stir up panic or hatred, they would have carved the symbol bigger than the size of a grape?

I let the pages of the book I was holding flutter closed and looked up to peer at the clock that I could just see above the bookshelves. It was nearing lunchtime and hunger was beginning to gnaw away inside my stomach. I would go and check on Georgie first, before returning to my chamber for some food, because I wanted to know whether she'd regained consciousness yet. I prayed she had; she had seemed too still, too limp, when I'd left her in my bed.

I pushed my chair back from the table and scooped the books into my arms, my eyes barely peeping out over the top. I hadn't thought I'd picked out so many titles, but then, some of them were fairly chunky and some of them had diagrams included and...

I slammed into something solid, the books tumbling from my hands and landing with a thump on the floor. There was hardly anybody ever in the library in the mornings and why hadn't they just moved out of the way? Why did this always happen to me? Why...

"I'm so sorry, that was completely my fault." I quickly knelt down, beginning to gather the books into my arms. It was Lord Julien that I'd bumped into because of course it was. I felt as Georgie was someone taunting me, even when she was unconscious and still in shock according to the doctor.

Of course it was Lord Julien, the best friend of the King, one of the most powerful men in the country and someone who seemed intent on following me wherever I went.

"It's fine." I answered stiffly, quickly picking up the books nearest to me before he could reach over and grab them. He was dressed in what seemed to be his standard uniform for when he needed to look official - a dark navy shirt, jacket and matching breeches. I looked towards the floor as soon as I caught him looking at my face, eager not to have to take any books from his outstretched hand. I didn't want to accidentally brush fingers with him.

"I'm very clumsy." He continued, almost bashfully. Why was he still speaking? "You should see how many of my dinner plates I end up dropping and my manservant has to go and explain to Mr. Hornsby why they have to buy more plates."

It appeared he also had a strange sense of humour - in all the time I'd known him, I didn't think I'd ever seen him smile so much whilst speaking. It was slightly unnerving.

"What were you reading?" He asked, gesturing to the books that were now clutched in my hands.
He was still holding two of the books I was yet to return to the shelves. Why was he asking when he could just look down at the books in his hands?

Because he really was honorable, instead of just playing at it like I was.

"I was researching into something."

"Care to enlighten me?" He asked with a slight smirk and I bit my lip. Not really. Ideally, I wanted him to leave me alone.

"I was looking into a hunch that I had about why someone would do what they did to Lady Georgiana." I had no qualms that he knew exactly what that was. I was sure the whole castle knew by now.

"And what do you think?" I turned towards the bookshelf, carefully placing two of my books back onto the shelf before I answered. Despite my hours of research, I still wasn't sure if what I had found was of any importance or if it even related to Georgie's condition at all.

Lord Julien took a step towards me, his breath warming the side of my neck and his hands close enough that he could reach out and touch me if he wanted to. I narrowed my eyes at him as he looked around for a moment. What was he doing? I caught a trace of something that smelled...expensive. And sweet, like summer berries.

Why was I describing his scent? Was I really so malnourished?

"If I'm perfectly honest, none of us currently has any idea as to what happened so anything you have to say on the matter would be most helpful." His voice was low and quiet, his dark eyes glinting in the shadows produced by the towering shelves. "I'm sure that all you want to do is help; so do I. So..." It was clear why he was such an effective diplomatic. That gleam in his eyes was infectious. And troubling.

"I think that somebody carved a symbol into Georgiana's bedpost." I said slowly, mirroring his quiet tone.

"A symbol?" I nodded.

"It's a religious symbol, really, about spirituality and femininity and life everlasting." It was more than ironic, seeing as it had been carved next to the decapitated head of a unicorn. "It could just be a maker's mark or..."

"It could be something more deliberate."

"Maybe what happened has a religious or spiritual element? Unicorns are hallowed in many cultures, including ours. Or maybe that's what the perpetrator wants us to think."

"Thank you." Lord Julien said, after a moment of considered silence, his mouth curving into a genuine smile. "Thank you. All we've been able to figure out is that none saw or heard anything last night and that isn't much to go on, particularly when you have a foreign queen snapping at your heels."

I swallowed the dryness of my throat. Queen Estella was causing problems?

"I'll be sure to credit you with the idea when I inform the King." He said with a smirk, inclining his head in respect, before turning on his heels and swiftly disappearing between the stacks, his boots silent against the polished floor.
Because of course the only thing that I cared about in all this was recognition.
Chapter 19

Lady Georgiana Howard

The first sensation that I was able to comprehend was the way that every inch of my body seemed to ache, as though I'd repeatedly thrown myself against a wall. Even my eyelids felt too heavy for my body, beaten and exhausted as I tried to claw them open with my hands as I rolled onto my side. The pale green floral wallpaper stared back at me as I slowly blinked against the light, attempting to gain a grasp of my surroundings and why the pain shooting through my body seemed to have intensified since the last time I could remember.

Green wallpaper? The wall coverings in my chamber were blue; I'd stared at them often enough and for long enough while I couldn't sleep to know that my chamber walls were a light, gentle blue. Not green.

I flopped onto my back, groaning quietly at the reverberations the motion sent flooding through my brain. I rubbed at my eyes again and slowly opened them wider, glancing Lysa and then Karinna who were perched at the end of my bed - Lysa was looking semi-traumatized and Karinna was wearing the ghost of a smile on her face. Why were they both hovering over me with such solemn expressions? And why was I - I focused on the wall covering for another moment - resting in Karinna's bed?

Shit.

The unicorn. Randell. Caspian. Everything began flooding back into my head, those final moments of consciousness where I'd been lying on the ground, praying for the lights to go out and thus stop the agony throbbing through my skull. I let my eyes flutter shut again and I let out a louder groan.

"I fainted in front of the King." I moaned, pouting as I looked over at Lysa and Karinna.

"And it gets worse." Karinna said, sadly and I instantly narrowed my eyes, ignoring the ripples of pain building in my head.

"How can it get worse?" I locked my arms against my sides and tried to push myself up but Lysa immediately sprung onto me, pushing me back down with a determined force. She was remarkably strong for someone who most considered to do nothing but plait my hair and fold my clothes.

"He carried you in here." Karinna didn't even have to elaborate as to who he was. It was fairly obvious that it wasn't Markus.

"I wasn't even conscious for the one thing that I wanted the most." I sniffed, seeing Karinna roll her eyes slightly, as I shifted my legs and let out a sigh. If possible, I felt even worse now because coupled with the physical pain, there was the petty yearning that I felt whenever I came into direct contact with him. Markus called it my 'pining'.

"I'm just glad your awake." Lysa said, brushing some hair away from my face as she reached for my hand before she started rearranging the pillows below my head. "We were worried you might have gone into a coma, or something."

"I'm fine." I insisted, feeling a twist of guilt in my stomach for causing them so much distress. I could read it in their faces, the way their bodies were positioned as close to the bed as they could possibly get. I swallowed the lump in my throat. "You're over-reacting."
"Because there are a multitude of tonics and medicines that you can take to help your migraines and it's not as though the only thing you've found to have any affect is lying in a dark room with your eyes closed." Karinna remarked with a raised brow. "And your migraines definitely aren't so debilitating that you lose consciousness and have to be carried out by the King."

"I can't believe I knocked myself unconscious and missed it." I whined again, seeing this was the only option left open for me to do because, judging from the stern look in Lysa's eyes, there was no way that she was letting me leave the bed. But I was going to be thinking about this moment for years to come, the opportunity that I'd missed, the what-could-have-been, the beautiful moment that we could have had. "How long was I unconscious?"

"About an hour."

My eyes instantly shot down to the foot of the bed, narrowing sharply as my hands gripped the bedsheets.

Of course she was here. Of course Lucille had managed to worm her way in here and I hadn't even noticed until she'd spoken, partly because my brain still felt as though it was only functioning on half capacity but also because she was so skilled at slipping into the background and remaining undetected.

The intensity at which I was narrowing my eyes was beginning to make my head spin but I didn't have any other reaction to her presence, no other words to explain just what I was feeling as I took in her figure lounging on an armchair at the foot of the bed.

"What are you doing here?" My voice turned cold, my throat stiff.

"I was worried about you." I rolled my eyes, reining in the deep urge inside of me to scoff at this comment. I couldn't remember the last time Lucille had acted as though she was worried about either myself or Markus, the way someone should act towards their niece and nephew, and her pretty words weren't going to disguise this from me.

"Where's Markus?" I asked, turning back towards Karinna and Lysa. I didn't have enough energy to start commanding her to leave the room.

"I don't know." Karinna admitted after a moment, her eyes quickly scanning between myself and Lucille. "I haven't seen him."

"The last time I saw him he was running after Lord Julien." Lucille answered promptly, her dark eyes shining as she clasped her hands over her knees, the garnet ring sparkling on her finger.

"The last time you saw him or one of your spies did?"

"I don't have spies."

"They're the equivalent of spies." I shot back promptly. I was no secret to people who were observant that Lucille had many of the courtesans in her pocket and used them to keep an eye on every inch of the castle. She couldn't be everywhere at once but her troop of informants definitely helped in discovering every minute detail that happened within court.

She called the majority of them her 'friends'; it would take more for me to call someone a friend than a constant supply of gold and access to rich men.

"What have I missed while I was unconscious?" I suddenly turned my head to watch Lysa squeezing a strip of fabric of excess water from where it had been steeping in warm water. Her silence was beginning to unnerve me; she seemed so wholly focused on the task that her hands were doing, there
was no more energy for her to speak. Had my condition really rattled her so much?

"It's been mixed with herbs and leaves." She murmured as I lightly grasped her wrist before she could lay the fabric across my forehead. I gave her a stern look. Really? "The doctor's think it might soothe your head."

The notion may have sounded fairly ridiculous but, at this point, I'd tried every single one of their apparent 'miracle' cures that one more couldn't hurt. Even if looking brainless and vulnerable in front of Lucille was something that I wanted to desperately avoid.

"I found a symbol carved into your bedpost." Karinna said slowly and I felt something inside my chest constrict.

"What?"

"I found a symbol carved into your bedpost and I did some research," Naturally, of course she had, "and, among other things, it's supposed to represent the three stages of femininity and the cycle of life."

"But why would somebody do that?" I questioned, as the warm water began to trickle down my temples and Lysa dabbed it away. "Why would somebody butcher a unicorn and leave that behind?"

"Who have you had an argument with lately?" Lucille asked and I paused. "That's what the guards are going round asking about Randell to try and find his killer."

As if the killer would just admit that they'd had a raging argument with Randell in the hours before his death.

"That doesn't sound like they have very much to go on." I continued, knowing full-well that Lucille gained this gleam of information from one of her spying ladies. "And it also sounds like this whole ordeal has some religious connections."

"Maybe, or someone just wants us to think that." Karinna finished.

"I still can't understand why somebody would do that to you." Lysa murmured quietly, her voice barely more than a whisper.

"Maybe it was a scornful lord that you declined." Karinna said with a smirk and I raised an eyebrow at her.

"Okay firstly, I don't decline many lords in the first place because not that many tend to ask me and those that do are definitely not clever enough to sneak into my chamber and perform something like that." I said indignantly, the sheer recollection of the event sending waves of nausea shooting through my stomach. "Why did they have to do it with a unicorn, anyway? Why couldn't they just do it with a pheasant?"

"Why at all?" Lysa repeatedly resentfully.

"To make a point." Lucille said, her voice chilling. "To show that they can."
Lord Julien Cavendish, Marquis of Irvington

I took the stairs two at a time, leaping up them before surging down the corridor and quickly checking the clock on the wall as I sped around the corner. Because of my altercation with Lady Karinna, I was now going to be a couple of minutes late to Caspian's meeting. This already made my skin crawl because I despised being late but I knew Caspian wouldn't mind and he was the only person whose opinion I should really value, seeing as he was the King. Mother, on the hand, would be ready to throw me to the dogs and I didn't need to give the elderly, conservative lords any more incentives to think the only reason I had my position within the council was because of my mother's status.

I slowed to a halt outside the grand oak doors leading to the council chamber, allowing myself a moment to catch my breath and to straighten out my tunic before I heaved open the doors and stepped inside.

This was going to be most entertaining.

Every eye in the room turned around to greet me as I quickly made my way over to the empty chair that was sat on mother's left hand side. I didn't dare meet the gaze of any of the frowning nobles as I slid into my seat - I did not need to be accused of looking at someone the wrong way - as Caspian looked over at me from the head of the table, not allowing my interruption to disrupt his speech for a second. He rolled his eyes slightly as I met his stare, the reasons for my late arrival no doubt running through his mind.

I didn't need mother to quickly tell me what I'd missed however, not that she ever would, because the restless mood of the room was clearly palpable. We'd been able to keep most of the details of Sir Randell's death classified to as few people as possible in order to quell the already fervent panic that was bound to be created in the coming days. One thing that we did not need to maximize at the moment, especially considering we were in the midst of playing host to a foreign queen, was mass hysteria.

Caspian paused for a moment, looking down at his hand-written notes that he brought with him to every council meeting, before continuing. The longer he stressed the importance of keeping a united front then the less time mother would have to scold me on my lateness. While Caspian may find my reasoning amusing, I had no doubt that she would not.

"We need to find the perpetrator's motive - this wasn't a blitz attack, it was thought out and methodical and that means somebody had a strong motivation behind his death."

"That's what we were doing yesterday, sire." Duke Orel said sharply, his pen poised in his hand. There wasn't a single council meeting in which he didn't lord his investment into the military in front of our faces. Mother despised him. "Whilst the rest of the council were attending the hunt." The edge to his voice was unmistakable.

Because of course the lack of progress in the mystery over the last twenty-four hours was now wholly our fault for attending the hunt and entertaining a foreign Queen whose influence and resources would be a great help to the economy and was a union that Orel in particular had been pushing to the forefront of the meetings for months. Caspian could clearly put his effort into forging ties with Queen Estella and spend every waking moment on the case as well.
Caspian skillfully ignored this comment with a smile and a commendation of securing Sir Randell's chamber from any other wandering nobles or servants. "We also need to find out how he spent his last waking moments: whom he talked to, whom he argued with, who could possibly benefit from his death."

"He was liked by everyone, sire." Lord Heath inputted solemnly; his close relationship with Sir Randell was known by everyone who was sat around the table. If he'd spoken any other response, we would have begun to get suspicious. "He was a brilliant swordsman - " How were those two connected in any way? I quickly jotted this down onto the piece of paper in front of me, feeling mother's eyes honing in on the scratching of my pen against the parchment.

"I know he was an exceptional swordsman." Caspian interrupted, before Heath could finish giving what was probably his pre-prepared eulogy. "But - "

"You shouldn't speak ill of the dead, your Majesty." Mother said sternly and I withheld the need to roll my eyes. She had spoken ill of the dead on many an occasion; she was simply trying to add to the persona that she created whenever she stepped into this room. She was hardly suspicious.

"I'm speaking the truth, Your Grace." Caspian said somewhat warmly before continuing. "That Sir Randell could be arrogant and unkind sometimes." The atmosphere in the room turned frosty. Everyone knew that this was true - his title certainly didn't mean he was automatically kind and chivalrous - but none of them seemed willing to admit it. If asked, mother would probably deny having ever seen an example of such behavior even if I could list the number of different servants who'd requested to be given a different master.

"That is - " Heath started, his pale eyes narrow.

"The truth, sir." I interrupted. "Everyone knows that Sir Randell could often be in an unsavory mood." Unsavory mood wasn't even the half of it.

"We need to inquire with his servants and find out how he's been acting over the last few weeks, who he's been seeing in his room, in particular which women - "

"Certainly no high born woman would act in such a way." Sir Abraham spat in half-disgust. He was one of the more conservative council members and it wasn't uncommon for him and Caspian to be engaged in fierce debates surrounding topics that Abraham deemed to be immoral. I deemed him to be immoral...

"So men are allowed to act on their desires but women aren't? Men are expected to but women are subjected to condemnation?" Caspian asked sharply and Abraham seemed to almost shrink back into his chair, his frail hands dropping into his lap.

Caspian wasn't about to let any of his misogynistic crap slide; if he hadn't had said something, I would have aimed a sharp comment in his direction.

"Sir Randell could be extremely persuasive when he wanted to be and we can't count anybody out from having some sort of relationship with him, no matter their yearly earnings. He might have promised them something: money or financial security or marriage. Or, he might have taken to more forceful methods."

I didn't know what the lords were looking more uncomfortable about - the fact that the King was speaking ill of a man who had been found murdered in his bed twenty four hours ago or that they were being forced to acknowledge that violence against women was actually something that happened and was not just something they could ignore because it didn't affect them.
They'd spent long enough ignoring the things that hadn't directly affected them; that was where Miraz had come from. Caspian wasn't going to let them go on living their lives in ignorant bliss.

Mother had straightened up in her chair, her eyes like knives as she scanned over the lords that looked the most horrified at the mention of violence against women. I could pick at her for many things but at least she had never dug her head into the sand and pretended that violence wasn't occurring under her nose.

"People will be beginning to panic," Caspian continued, "as the news continues to spread." Despite having kept details to a minimum, we knew that the gossip would be unparalleled as word swept through the city. A number of officials had wanted Caspian to keep completely silent on the matter and deny any knowledge of what had happened but a number of other people, myself and my mother included, had swiftly vetoed this. People would start to ask questions as to where Sir Randell was when he ultimately didn't appear in the tavern or on the battle fields and I never thought lying to people was the best solution.

"So I need you to work efficiently and discretely by speaking to his servants and his men and anyone else who is affiliated with him, is that understood?" The murmurs and nods of affirmation passed around the table as I saw Caspian let out a small sigh. "Dismissed."

I shot out of my chair and made my way over to Caspian before mother could jump on me. I watched him shuffle his notes into a neat pile before he turned to look at me, a smirk on his face. "Why were you late?" I paused for a moment, trying to think of a way that I could explain myself that didn't end with him teasing me.

"I was returning some books to the library - "

"Of course you were,"

"And then I happened to bump into Lady Karinna. Literally." Caspian raised an amused eyebrow and I bit my lip to stop myself from saying anything outright, especially seeing as a handful of the lords were loitering by the doors and I knew they would want to chastise me for having such a casual conversation with the King. I couldn't help if he was my best friend as well as my King.

"I hope you apologized." Caspian said, his eyes sparkling with laughter and I rolled my eyes. "Of course I did." But not in the way he was implying. "That wasn't what I wanted to talk to you about. She was researching a theory - "

"Go on." Caspian's gaze had now turned more serious as the door to the council chamber finally closed and we were left alone in the room.

"She found some sort of religious symbol that was carved into Lady Georgiana's bed post."

"So there's a religious angle now, too." Caspian said with a sigh.

"Possibly," I reassured him. "Or someone wants to make it look as though there is. Nothing like that was found on Randell's body however, so it may just have been a singular event. Are you sure that they are connected?" This had been Caspian's initial theory but I was struggling to follow through.

"Stabbing a man three times and slitting his throat is very different than butchering a unicorn and tying it to a bedpost." Caspian admitted. "But both were quick and efficient."

"So it could, conceivably, be the same killer." I finished and Caspian nodded.
"Possibly. Good work, though. I'll look into the religious angle. No one else knows about this?" I shook my head. "I'd rather not stir up unnecessary religious hatred if I don't have to."

Religious hatred was the last thing that we needed, especially with the Lakosian officials circling around like bloodhounds trying to investigate Randell's murder alone.

"Did - Did Lady Karinna mention as to how Lady Georgiana was faring?" I held Caspian's gaze for a moment, a smirk playing on my lips.

"No, she didn't. You sound very concerned - " Caspian opened his mouth to defend himself but I continued. "But, of course, she's beautiful and intelligent so of course you're going to be concerned."

Caspian rolled his eyes.

"She fainted in front of me! I'm only being considerate, unlike you who walked straight into a lady and nearly knocked her over."

"It was an accident!"

"Of course it was." How was this suddenly about me? He was the one who'd been asking about Lady Georgiana who he seemed to be finding any opportunity to interact with me. "I was thinking - "

"About Lady Karinna? I know, that's why you walked into her."

"No." I said through gritted teeth, watching Caspian chuckle as we started walking towards the doors. "My mother was surprisingly well behaved during that meeting." It wasn't unheard of for her to be the one pointing out an lord's misogynistic attitudes and while Caspian went unquestioned, he was the King, my mother would then be deemed as speaking out of place, as if that wasn't the whole point of speaking out against people's attitudes in the first place.

"'Beware the quiet ones.' That's the saying, isn't it?"

That wasn't what I was afraid of. When she was quiet, that usually meant that she was plotting something.

- What do you think of Caspian and Julien's relationship? And could Hestia really be plotting something?
Chapter 20

Lysa Carker

By the time the sun was hanging from its peak, I felt as though I'd been working for at least three
days straight; between rushing over to Karinna's chamber to check on Georgie and washing her
clothes, Mrs. Boweson had squeezed a shift in the kitchens and the laundry rooms for me that had
left me feeling drained.

That hadn't even been the hardest part of my day (not even my day, just my morning) because that
had been somehow keeping Georgie confined to a bed. I didn't believe a word of her story about
feeling completely better - there was still a slightly vacant look in her eyes because she had to squint
to look up into the light. The doctors had checked her over and recommended that rest would be the
most effective cure and, even if they hadn't, I would have kept her in bed based purely on my own
judgement. The herbal wrap on her forehead hadn't seemed to do anything - not that any of us had
expected it to - and I'd left her sleeping in Karinna's chamber.

She was only sleeping because I'd threatened her with a sleeping draught. She needed to rest, not be
worrying about Lord Bayard or Queen Estella or the King. She needed to rest.

I'd found out a long time ago about her refusal to take sleeping draughts, even if she had accepted the
first couple I'd brought to her from the doctors. I could understand her reasoning, though, because I
too wanted to be in control of my own body and my own actions at all times, rather than having
another force dictate them for me. I did think that the softened Georgie's symptoms a little, they
allowed her a peaceful sleep at least, but I'd never push something onto her like that.

And if someone could manage to sneak into her chambers and strap the butchered head of a unicorn
to her bed frame when she hadn't taken a sleeping draught, I'd hated to think about what someone
would be able to do if she had. It was a vile thought.

I'd tried to concentrate all of my energy on looking after Georgie, rather than feeding into the
rumours that were circumventing about just how the unicorn had had ended up in her room and who
was to blame. Some deluded people thought that Georgie herself was responsible and the whole
charade was just a way for her to gain attention.

I'd never heard a more ridiculous comment in my entire life, aside from the time a rumor had
somehow been created that Tristan bred mermaids in his parent's fish pond. That had been a strange
afternoon...

After I'd grabbed myself some lunch (I'd had to take mine in the kitchen seeing as I'd spent so long
on my morning tasks that Tristan's lunch had been and gone and I knew he would be back at work),
I'd been thrust back onto laundry duty and had been tasked with lugging some of the baskets of
bedsheets from the laundry rooms back to the linen cupboard.

It was everybody's favourite task.

Not.

I'd only volunteered because Cook happened to be in a particularly foul mood and I didn't want to
spend another moment than I had to in the kitchen.

I quickly re-tied my hair up onto the top of my head with the string of ribbon that I always kept in my
pocket before picking up the sack of laundry and started trudging down the corridor again. I always
needed a rest half-way between the laundry rooms and my destination. There were just too many
damn corridors.

I couldn't even distract myself by looking at the clothes, it was only bedsheets and pillow cases and
boring items. Even inhaling the fresh, floral scent wasn't enough to completely distract me, even
when it did remind me of spring and when everyone was stuck in the cold and what seemed like
endless gray days, it was the promise of spring that kept me going. And the knowledge that every
step I took was just another closer to the end of my day, meaning I was one step closer to going
home and seeing Mila again.

Mother had been told to spend the next couple of days in bed and resting and while she hadn't stuck
to this (I'd returned from work yesterday to find that in between feeding Mila, she'd decided to clean
all the pots in the kitchen) she was doing less than she normally did, so Father was forcing my
brothers to take up some of the jobs that needed doing. I was also going home as often as I could in
any breaks I had and I knew Tristan was too, as well as her friends Tristan's parents who had already
been over three times.

I'd been almost skeptical at first about my ability to love another person, considering the magnitude
that I felt for my parents, my brothers, Tristan, Georgie but from the second I'd looked into her little
face, the tuft of red hair clearly marking her out as one of us, I'd felt my heart swell in a way that I
hadn't felt for a very long time. She was perfect, more than perfect. Mother kept teasing that I now
had another girl on my side and I'd never thought about it that way before; I'd never felt that I had
been lacking anything in my life that another girl could add.

Aside from my mother, Georgie, Karinna and a couple of other servants, my life was vastly
dominated by men but that wasn't through my own choice. That was just the cards life had decided
to deal me and was a direct result of having three younger brothers.

But now I had Mila and she was going to be the happiest, kindest and strongest person to ever walk
the earth. I would make sure of it.

That is, she would be if I ever managed to lug the laundry over to the linen cupboard at some point
today.

I rounded the corner, my arms straining at the effort from keeping the sack on my shoulder, and froze
before slowly backing away, careful to keep my footsteps silent and breathing even. Queen Estella
and the Duchess of Irvington were steadily making their way down the corridor, their voices low.

I peered around the corner, thankful that they'd yet to see me for some reason that I couldn't quite
explain. I'd felt uneasy around Queen Estella from the moment that I'd locked eyes on her and I'd
been around the Duchess enough to know that her temperance could change in an instant.

I knew enough about the Duchess to know that Georgie wasn't her biggest fan and Georgie's opinion
on people was one that I tended to trust. According to her, and several of the servants that I'd
overheard gossiping, she had her priorities in the wrong order and seemed to care much less about
Lord Julien as her son and more as a political and diplomatic ally. I felt inclined to agree - but then
maybe that was just a result of being bred inside a court and having your every move scrutinized and
judged, more so in her case for the sole reason that she wore a skirt rather than breeches.

I knew far less about Queen Estella, however, and there seemed to be much more a mixed opinion
circulating about her. Some of the servants seemed to love her, practically worshipped her, and I felt
sure this was more to do with her spectacular appearance and imposing yet graceful presence rather
than her personality.
I slowly lowered the bag of laundry to the floor. Why had I stopped walking? Why had I backed away and decided to hide behind the corner as though I was some sort of spy? It was completely plausible for the pair to be talking to each other: the Duchess was effectively Queen Estella's host. There was nothing unusual about that.

But it was the lack of guards and the hushing of their voices that made me pause. They were two of the most powerful and influential women in the entire world and here they were completely unprotected by any guards, or anybody at all for that matter. Of course, I knew that they could have simply sent the guards away but then why were they walking down this exact corridor? The chambers in this area all belonged to not very important noblemen and the occasional soldier.

Not the kind of people I'd presume Queen Estella to be interested in meeting with.

My curiosity was churning in my stomach and I thought back to the hundreds of conversations that I'd had with my mother over the years about this being both my best and worst quality. This time, that quality might very well throw me into a vat of boiling oil.

But I was going to have to take that chance.

I began to creep closer, my arms locked around the laundry bag. If I was caught, I was going to have to rely on the bag as my excuse, that I really was just doing my job and not eavesdropping on the two most powerful women in the kingdom at this very moment.

The sheer thought of that made me want to hide and to pray at their feet. I realised I was holding my breath.

They were talking about the King, of course, and the economy and the state of the castle and everything else that I would have expected two foreign leaders to be talking about as they traipsed through a castle. It was the friendliness that seemed to radiate between them, however, that I picked up upon. They had known each other for little over a day at this point and yet the formal covering seemed to have been thrown off to give way to something all the more informal.

That could have just been the pair of them employing their best diplomacy tactics in trying to lure the other into a false sense of security. But we were supposed to be making alliances with the Lakosians, weren't we? So why would we need to manipulate them into anything?

The Duchess was actually laughing about something the Queen was saying. I didn't think, in all my years of working at the castle, that I had ever seen her laugh before. Ever. Not even on her birthday...

Queen Estella suddenly whipped around and I swore my heart dropped down into my stomach. Her eyes were burning like hot coals, her rope of dark hair whipping around her head like some kind of serpent. The Duchess turned more slowly, her gaze slowly eyeing me up as I dropped into a quick courtesy and hurried past them, keeping my eyes on the ground, before they could question me on just what exactly I had been doing.

I'd been doing nothing. I'd been taking the bag of laundry from the laundry rooms to the linen cupboard. That was all.

Definitely not eavesdropping on anybody.

Once I reached the other side of the corridor, I kept up my quick walking pace. Why had the pair of them made me feel so jumpy and on edge? I had seen the Duchess more times than I could count and I'd never felt so nervous, so unsure, around her, aside from the first ever time I'd seen her and I'd nearly dropped the huge plate of food that I'd been carrying at the time. What was going on?
I pushed the thought away. I didn't have time to be thinking about that right now. I needed to get on with my chores so that I could get home and see Mila and my mother again.

I didn't have time to be worrying about foreign queens and leaders who had their priorities jumbled.
Chapter 21

Lady Georgiana Howard

I tightened my grip around Markus' forearm, locking my free arm around the crook off his elbow as I carefully put one foot in front of the other. The pounding in my head had softened considerably but my vision was still a little hazy and my balance unpredictable so Markus was helping me walk back to my chamber so that Karinna could sleep in her own bed for the night. He'd offered to carry me at first, but I'd quickly rejected this notion; I was perfectly capable of walking down a couple of corridors without being carried.

Karinna hadn't mentioned anything about the fact that Caspian had had to carry me into her chamber and, mercifully, neither did Markus but I knew there was no way in hell that he didn't know about it.

I'd been informed that the unicorn's head had now been removed; I didn't think to deeply into this, neither how exactly the guards had managed to remove it nor to replay the image in my mind. I did not need that imagine ingrained any more deeply into my head than it already was.

"I don't want you fainting on the way there." Markus said gently, as he slowed the pace that I'd been walking at and I shot him a glare. I might be feeling slightly weak and my vision was blurring slightly but that didn't mean I couldn't look after myself.

"You're being overdramatic." I insisted, feeling a cool blast of air hit my skin as we passed the doorway that led up into the higher levels of the castle. I wanted to return to my warm bed and banish any thought of winter from my mind. "I'll be perfectly fine tomorrow."

My migraines were never usually so debilitating and they certainly never normally resulted in me losing consciousness. I couldn't even remember the last time before today that I'd lost consciousness. And yet there was nothing I could do aside from sleep and rest and wait for them to pass. Every other technique and medicine that I had tried had been ineffective.

"Come on, Princess." Markus murmured, his eyes scanning over my face as he noticed my miserable expression. I instantly scowled at him and straightened up, my eyes shooting daggers at him; he might have a few extra inches on me but that didn't mean I couldn't be intimidating.

"Why are you calling me that?"
"Because I have to look after my baby sister for a change." Princess was the nickname our parents had given me when I'd been little and the title had stuck, even into adulthood apparently.

"One - you're not looking after me." I said pointedly. Markus had come to check on me, I'd been reliably informed by Karinna and had gone as far as forcing Lucille to leave the room, but I knew that to sit and watch me suffer and be in pain would have been agony for him because there was nothing he could do to help aside from bringing additional blankets from the linen cupboard and ensuring the wind didn't blow the curtains open.

"I am looking after you - "

"I'm sure the only reason you're even doing this is because there's a chance that you might see one of the handsome guards that you're pining over." Pining was the word that Markus always used to describe my relationship with Caspian and he wasn't the only one who could throw it into someone's face when they were being annoying. "And I'm only two years younger than you. I don't think that counts as being a baby."
"You'll always be my baby sister in my eyes." Markus said with a grin and if I had the strength to pry my hands away from his body then I would have socked him around the head.

"What have you done today?" I asked after a few moments of silence as we continued making our way down the corridors back towards my chamber. Every step felt like a victory. "While I was - "

"Giving Lysa a hard time, from the sound of it." Markus interrupted with a smirk and I ignored him, resting my head against his upper arm. I wasn't quite tall enough to rest it on his shoulder, at least not without standing on the tips of my toes or wearing higher shoes.

"Stalking some guards, perhaps?"
"Actually, I had a very productive day." Markus said proudly, "whilst you were busy sleeping. I got a lot of fight practice in so that I can now single-handedly save the city from attack when the Lakosians decide to make their move - " I sighed and gave him an incredulous look. "And I might also be on the way to securing some more soldiers for our army."

"What?" I hadn't heard anything about this, not that Markus told me everything anyway even though that was something I contiously stressed - we couldn't run a city if neither of us knew all of the information. "Really? Who from?"

"I'm not going to tell you." He said firmly and I widened my eyes at him, causing flashes of light to dance before them. Seriously? "Because it might very well fall through and not work out in the end."

"Come on, you have to tell me." I pleaded, squeezing his forearm with as much force as I could muster.

"No."

"You have to!"

"No." Markus repeated, a smile growing on his face as I sighed and pushed him with my shoulder.

"You can be so annoying sometimes!" I whined and still he didn't speak, just looked down on me with an amused look on his face. "Tell me! Markus - "

"Connell, Lancott and Crawley." He said with a sigh and I started grinning as I digested the information. All three were influential lords with small but important lands to the east and west. Exactly the sort of people we were interesting on building alliances with. "Now he's a handsome man - "

"Who?" Markus' tastes tended to change quite quickly. It was difficult to keep up sometimes.

"Crawley."

"Oh yes, he's so dreamy with that beard that looks like a bird's nest." I said and Markus rolled his eyes at me.

I tightened my grip on his arm as he carefully led me up the stairs that stood between Karinna's chambers and my own. I knew that Markus could feel my vice-like hold, how I was desperately holding onto him so that I didn't sway and fall, that I was weaker than I was letting on.

"And speaking of dreamy - " Markus trailed off, a smirk playing on his lips, and I frowned at him.

"What?" He didn't speak, simply gestured to the corridor, his devilish smirk growing. I looked up before glaring at Markus out of the corner of my eye. Prick.
It was Caspian, dressed in a combination of navy velvet and satin with his hair flowing behind him. His eyes were staring straight ahead but his vision was glazed, as though while his physical self may have been walking down the corridor straight towards us, in his mind he was somewhere different entirely.

He seemed to snap out of his daze as we approached, a surprised expression dawning on his face as I dipped into a low curtsey and Markus inclined his head.

I had to clench onto Markus’ arm as I straightened up, my legs shaking slightly. I had spend the entirety of the day in bed; that was the most physically taxing task I'd performed in the last twelve hours.

"Are you feeling better, milady?” He asked, with a sincere smile on his face and I could feel Markus’ eyes boring into my head. He could feel how tightly I was gripping his arm, how unsteady I was on my own two feet despite my defiance.

"Much better, thank you sire." I said, shooting Markus a stern look.

"She hasn’t made a full recovery yet - " Markus interrupted, raising an eyebrow at me and I could have hit him for that smug expression alone. "But she'll be perfectly well by the morning."

"I'm glad to hear it." Caspian said and if he noticed the exasperated look I was shooting at Markus then he didn't show it.

"I need to thank you, for helping me earlier." I said, forcing myself to look Caspian in the eye and not look away. I didn't need him to think that I was being impolite; I could feel myself beginning to flush just by locking eyes with him. I felt sure he was stood far too near to us to be diplomatically proper and if he was surrounded by his usual security detail, I knew that one of his guards would have pulled me away by now.

But he wasn't and he hadn't. I could stare into his perfect dark eyes for a little while longer.

"You fainted. I wasn't just going to leave you, that would have been very rude of me. You needed help." Despite the warm look on his face as he spoke, I was forced to swallow the lump that had formed in my throat and let my gaze fall to the floor. I sounded so fragile, so delicate, in that I hadn't even been able to keep control of my own body. Maybe that was the thing I hated most of all about my migraines - they left me utterly defenseless and powerless to the wills of my own body.

"Thank you, regardless, sire." I said shortly, feeling a smile creep onto my face as I met his kind gaze in spite of the cold, sinking feeling that was beginning to take over my body.

"If you don't mind me inquiring, sire," Markus asked slowly, "have you found out any further information regarding the incident in Georgiana's chamber?" Could Markus see just how uneasy I was beginning to feel? I doubted it, but I was thankful for him drawing the topic of conversation away from myself and my weaknesses. Not that this was a particularly political move, Marks was as itching to know more details about my not-attacker as I was

"The only detail we've really been able to identify is that no one seems to have seen or heard anything in regards to the actual incident itself." Caspian said slowly, the smile fading from his face to give way to a more serious expression.

I could feel myself beginning to get slightly dazed, just by staring at the way his hair and eyes flickered off the shreds of light given off by the tapers lining the corridor. I needed to snap out of it.

"You didn't see or hear anything nor did any nearby guards or passing servants. But - " He held my
gaze for a moment, his eyes firm and unyielding. "I promise that we're not going to stop until we
know exactly what happened. And a King doesn't break promises - " There was the sliver of nervous
humour that always seemed to creep into any speech or conversation when he was feeling somewhat
nervous. The question was, why was he feeling nervous? Was the stress of tackling my unicorn
incident and Randell's death weighing more heavily on his shoulders that it seemed to be?

"I wouldn't expect you to, sire." Markus was smirking slightly now, the connotations of my meaning
clear and apparently funny to him. "I trust Lady Karinna informed you of what she found?" Caspian
nodded; I knew Karinna had already told Markus when he'd come to visit me in her chamber.

"I'm going to look into it. See if there is anything else hidden in the symbol's meaning." I sincerely
hoped their wasn't. Not only did I not want my name to be embroiled in a religious hate-plot, I didn't
want there to be another scandal sweeping the court. "And now, I'll bid you goodnight." Caspian
inclined his head to me before he swept off past Markus. I remained rooted to the spot, Markus
looking at me curiously.

"Have you found out anything further about Sir Randell's death?" Because my incident with the
unicorn wasn't the only incident that I was interested in.

"You know, if this is your way of trying to talk to him I am sure there must be cheerier ways - "
Markus said with a sigh but I ignored him, watching Caspian turn back around to face us.

"We're working through a list of possible suspects." A much more diplomatic answer than the one
he'd given in regards to my unicorn. Despite his friendly tone and warm eyes, it was clear he was
never far from his role as statesman.

The only reason he'd given up this piece of information was because everybody knew Randell had
been murdered. It hadn't taken long for that detail to circumnavigate around court.

"Did you find the symbol Lady Karinna identified at the crime scene?" The one I had tried to figure
my way into. Would I be able to spot the symbol if I somehow managed to talk my way through the
door?

"No, we didn't."

"Are you sure?" Caspian didn't seem to have an answer to this and simply inclined his head again
before disappearing down the corridor. Markus was looking at me with a disapproving, if somewhat
amused, expression as we started walking again. The chill had fully slipped underneath my pale
green gown now and I could feel the cold chill over every inch of my skin. I wanted to get to my
chamber and snuggle under the covers.

"You know, that when you're delirious you always get very straight to the point?" He said pointedly
and I smirked. I didn't know whether my unicorn incident and Randell's death were connected, it
could have been merely coincidence that they occurred within the same twenty fours hours.

That seemed remarkably unlikely, however.

"Really? I didn't notice." I feigned, resting my head against Markus' arm again. He was always
unnaturally warm. "I was concentrating more on how handsome he looks in navy." Markus tutted.

"You're as bad as I am." He said with a grin, reassuringly squeezing my arm.

- Any ideas about how and if Randell and the unicorn are connected? What do you make of Markus,
Georgie and Caspian in this scene? Thanks for reading!
Chapter 22

Lord Markus Howard

I pushed my hands deeper into my pockets as I made my way down the empty corridor, my boots echoing against the concrete floor. I was heading straight for my chamber where I knew my book and glass of wine would be waiting for me; if I had to spend another second in this infernal cold then I was going to scream and throw a chair at someone.

I'd just helped Georgie to her chamber and after a few minutes of pacing her chamber, rearranging the books on the dining table and the jewelry on her vanity while she changed into her night clothes, she dismissed me by proclaiming she had no further need for me and if I was going to simply walk around and move all of her things then I could go and do that inside some lord's chamber instead of bothering her and making her migraine worse.

Firstly, there was no way that anything I had been doing could make her migraine worse. None. I had been being very respectful and had rebutted this by throwing her words back in her face - she had claimed that her migraine had completely gone so she'd lied to not only me but to the King.

Gasp. The King that she happened to have a thing for.

And secondly, if I was ever allowed inside a lord's chamber for reasons other than to talk diplomacy or play cards then I would certainly not be walking up and down and rearranging his possessions...

Anyway...

I turned the corner, noticing a figure speedily make their way towards me, their face and most of their body obscured by the huge laundry basket they were clutching to their chest. I slowed my pace as they approached, stepping to the side to try and make out their features. Surely that wasn't the taught method to carry laundry? You couldn't see any stairs, for one, and people, for two. I caught a flash of bright red hair as the figure passed and I felt a smile forming on my face.

"Lysa?" Lysa suddenly startled, lowering the basket to the ground with a sigh and giving me a tight smile. Her face looked to be coated in a thin sheen of sweat, despite the chilling evening temperature, and a few curls were plastered to her forehead.

"Sorry, I didn't see you - "

"I got that." I grinned, gesturing down to the laundry basket. It looked to be nearly as large as her. Surely they could have asked a taller servant to take it to wherever it was going? "Do you want some help?"

"Oh, no. It's fine. I'm nearly done. I'm going home after this so - "

"That basket is more than twice your size. And you look like you need a rest." I seized the handles of the basket before she could complain further and started making my way back down the way that I'd just come from, leaving Lysa no choice but to trail after me.

"Thank you." She said with a sigh, pushing some of the hair from her face and giving me a thankful smile. "I just need to take it to the linen cupboard."

"On it." I knew where that was, at least, and it had nothing to do with the incident I'd had when a general had come baying for my blood after I'd beat him at a drunken game of cards. "Thank you for
looking after Georgie today. I know that you've other work to be doing and just because you're her maid doesn't mean that you have to actually care for her -"

"She's my friend." Lysa said firmly, her eyes unwavering. She stated this like it was fact. And that made me smile in comfort.

"I wanted to look after her more but -" I sighed as we turned the corner. I hadn't lied to Georgie when I'd told her I thought we were close to making some alliances because we were, but I'd also been involved in a lot more besides. I hadn't wanted to add to what she had to worry about; I'd wanted her to rest and have a peaceful sleep. Not be worrying about the chaos that was possibly brewing on the horizon.

"Tensions are beginning to...strain a little, between some of the Narnians and the Lakosians." I said after a moment and I saw Lysa bite her lip. I hadn't actually said this to anyone, that the rivalries we'd all imagined might form were beginning to develop into fruition. "A couple of fights, nothing serious, but enough to get a few more people talking and unnerve others. Everyone is already feeling on edge because of what happened to Randell and Georgie and people on either side are getting eager to blame the other." I paused for a moment. "I don't know how it's going to turn out."

Lysa remained silent, her eyes straight ahead, but I could see the frown developing on her forehead. I was praying that this would be the last event of note to occur until Yule; it would have to, if Caspian wanted any chance of securing an alliance with Estella. I didn't know whether his campaign could take another blow like this.

"But anyway," I forced a smile onto my face as we made our way down one of the many staircases in the castle. "I know just how stubborn Georgie can be sometimes and -"

"You don't have to thank me." Lysa said with a smile, folding her arms. "It's my job, for starters, and even if it wasn't I would have helped because I care about her and I hate seeing her in pain."

"You're too good for all of this." I murmured, not expanding on what exactly this was but I still felt it. Lysa had a heart of pure gold; she deserved more than being caught up in a world of conflict, lies and fear.

"Well, you've been very good helping me carry my washing." She replied with a grin and I rolled my eyes. She had a keen wit about her too. That was how she managed to put up with Georgie. "There are too many nobles in this castle for us all to manage. It's getting a bit ridiculous."

"So, you're saying that in order to sort everything out, we need to throw some of the Lakosians in the lake?" I grinned, looking over at Lysa and it was her turn to roll her eyes.

"I'll be sacked if I say that." She said, a smirk growing on her face. "But it would sort everything out -"

I was seriously considering it at this point. All the problems seem to have stemmed from the arrival of the Lakosians but I knew I couldn't blame a whole nation for something that might simply be a case of catastrophic bad luck.

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The next morning, I was dragged bright and early from my bed to the news that the King had called a morning meeting with all the nobles. No one could tell me as to what the topic of the meeting was, hell - I didn't think any of them knew themselves, but I could hazard a pretty specific guess. There were only a handful of incidents that had occurred recently that would warrant a meeting with the entire court. I knew there would be a separate meeting with all the household staff.
I could feel the raw tension in the air as I took up my place in the Great Hall, my hands clapsed tightly behind my back if only to stop myself from fidgeting. A rumble of low anxious chatter filled the air; everyone was vying for answers and retribution and it seemed as maybe Caspian would be about to give these to us.

Because of my slightly late rising, I had had to take a spot on the right side of the horseshoe of nobles that were anxiously waiting for Caspian to stop talking to Lord Julien. I'd spotted Georgie on my entry and she was stood almost directly opposite me on the left side of the room. This was where the skill of lip-reading came in remarkably useful and was one we'd had to seriously refine over the years, especially when we'd been forced into one of our parents tedious meetings as children and we'd had to silently communicate with each other for entertainment. And because apparently, insulting diplomats to their faces was frowned upon for some reason.

The chatter in the room abruptly stopped, cold silence being left in its wake. Caspian was clearing his throat, giving Julien a nervous look before straightening up to address the crowd. I looked over at Georgie, noticing the slight frown in her expression as she kept her eyes pinned on Caspian. That was another downside to this whole business - it was affecting her 'relationship' with the King, one that I was keen to endorse.

I tried to keep my ears tuned in to the pleasantries Caspian was addressing the crowd with but I found myself drifting off. I felt so damn tired. I hadn't slept particularly well, I wasn't sure whether it had been the wine or my worry on Georgie's part, but I had been unable to sleep until the small hours of the morning. Now, I was cold and on edge and being forced to stand in a too-bright chamber with people who I didn't care for waiting for the King to stop being such a coward and tell us all what we wanted to know rather than commenting on the weather -

Wait. What was that? Someone had been arrested? Damn, I'd missed that...

"We believe that they may have some connection to Sir Randell and while this is not the end of our investigations and we have not charged anybody with his death yet, we do believe that this is progress."

The whole room was stirring, quiet whispers behind exchanged and no doubt rumours being passed around as quickly as a head cold in winter. Georgie was somewhat frantically scanning her eyes around the room and it took me a moment to decipher her reasoning; whoever had been arrested in connection with Randell's death couldn't possibly be in the room.

Shame. Sir Glyn was still positioned by the doors, no doubt having traded shifts with somebody so he could learn some of the gossip. He'd robbed me at cards a fortnight ago and still hadn't stopped parading the fact in front of me.

The suspect had been arrested for their crimes against Randell, not against Georgie. Did they have any suspects yet? Or were the crimes connected, like several people seemed to suspect?

I could feel a pair of eyes boring into my skull and I looked up to see Georgie staring at me, her eyes wide. She mouthed something to me, a name. My brows instantly furrowed.

Lucille.

I turned my head towards the far window on the right side of the room where I had known her to stand at every occasion we'd been forced to congregate in the hall for. And yet today she wasn't there.

Just because she was absent, however, did not mean that she had been arrested.
Georgie frowned at my expression and I noted the clear anxiety in her eyes. We hadn't been close with Lucille for years now; I had thought we were both united in the sense that while she might be our blood relative, there wasn't any particular loyalty there.

I shrugged and Georgie narrowed her eyes, mouthing something else. She's family.

She didn't act like it. She hadn't acted like it when she'd basically cut her ties to us for a few years and then returned after the death of her own family. Was Georgie forgetting about that?

But then Georgie had always had a complex relationship with her and I had never been able to identify the specific cause as to why. This had been particularly evident during her adolescent years after the death of our mother when she'd seemed to talk to Lucille, our now distant uncle Malkior who had been close to us at the time and no one else.

I shrugged again. How can you be sure it's her?

Caspian won't look at me.

I paused for a moment, my eyes focusing in on Caspian as he continued speaking to the crowd. That means nothing.

I couldn't deny the fact, however, that he did seem to be deliberately keeping his eyes away from where myself and Georgie would stood among the crowd. That could just be what my mind wanted me to see, however.

"Thank you. You're dismissed - " If my eyes weren't already fixed on Georgie's figure then I would have missed her as she shot through the slowly departing crowd, her strides quick and purposeful which left me hurrying after her. Could it really be Lucille who had been arrested? Was she involved in this whole affair?

"Lucille was arrested." Georgie said firmly as I managed to push my way through the crowd enough to walk side by side with her. Her face was set with a fierce determination, her eyes narrow and her frame tense.

"And?" Georgie threw me a ferocious glare and it took me by surprise. Did she really care for Lucille this much? The way she acted on a daily basis could make anyone assume that she hated her.

"And they've arrested the wrong person who happens to be our aunt." We pushed our way out of the Great Hall and Georgie immediately turned right, heading down the corridor that would lead to the courtyard. The air was bitingly cold and nipped against my exposed skin as we walked. If Georgie felt the cold, she didn't show it. She seemed to be being fueled by some sort of internal fire and rage.

"Why do you care so much now? Have you forgotten that we don't like Lucille?" Georlge swallowed and looked over at me.

"Maybe because I don't want what is happening to Karinna and her father to happen to us."

"As far as I'm concerned it's already happened." I replied, my confusion growing with every passing second. Why was she so adamant about doing this? How could she act so viciously to her on a daily basis but defend her so ardently at a time like this? It didn't make sense. Georgie had to be keeping something about this whole affair hidden. "Besides, we don't actually know that she isn't involved..."

"Yes, we do." She said, sharply.

"You weren't in that room when Randell was murdered."
"Yes, we do." Georgie repeated, abruptly stopping her quick pace as we stepped out into the courtyard and turned to fully face me. "Because Caspian was refusing to look at either of us, probably out of some internal guilt at having arrested one of our last surviving family members, and Julien was trying to push through the crowd in order to get to us, probably to try and explain everything before I hit someone."

I turned my head at the sound of rapid footsteps and, sure enough, Julien appeared around the corner, a look of relief appearing on his face as his eyes locked onto us.

I flash of smugness appeared on Georgie's face as she met my gaze and raised an eyebrow at me. I didn't know what to say. I just couldn't understand her sudden bout of good will towards Lucille. Maybe that made me a terrible person but I just couldn't make sense of it.

"You'd better start talking." Georgie called down the corridor, her voice echoing off the stone.

And he wasn't the only one.

- Some tensions look to be brewing between some of our characters, what do you think is going on?
I followed closely behind Julien, my head high as weaved through the hidden corridors and lower levels of the castle. I felt utterly single-minded about what I was doing; they had arrested the wrong suspect and I needed to correct their error. I would have to think about the other issues later - the fact that Markus had lied to me about his activity yesterday. I'd had no idea about the explosion of tensions and scuffles that had occurred and even though Julien claimed arresting someone had been the only way to temporarily subdue these tensions, I wasn't going to let him use Lucille as his scapegoat.

I'd listened to Julien's hurried reasoning as to their evidence pointing to Lucille and had given him nothing more than a blankly skeptical look. So what if Randell had been one of Lucille's clients? I was not accepting that she had killed him because he owed her money and was refusing to pay. Lucille had more guile than almost everyone that I had ever met and it didn't take a renowned scholar to be able to realise that a corpse definitely couldn't pay off their debts to you.

The prison levels of the castle were easy to identify - the second I passed the threshold, Markus by my shoulder, I was hit with a wave of bitter stale air that made me thankful I had chosen to wear a thicker gown. Everything felt cold and dank and isolated and, as we followed Julien down a row of empty narrow cells, I felt the remnants of my migraine begin to prickle in the back of my head.

I lost count of the number of gates we passed through, all controlled by a pair of guards whom Julien seemed to know by name and was able to pass through with merely a nod. I scanned the door of every single cell we passed, squinting to see through the bars in the gloomy light for a flash of dark hair.

Julien suddenly came to a stop and gestured a little further down to a corner cell that, after what seemed like hours of wandering the corridors, I'd realised happened to be a little bigger than the other cells. I brushed past him, my hands clenching at my sides. I needed to ensure that she was okay; I needed to see her with my own eyes.

"You need to understand that - "

"No. You need to understand that you have got this whole thing wrong." I snapped, stepping forwards to see a figure lying on top of the low bed that was provided, her hands neatly clasped over her stomach and her legs crossed. If I didn't know, if it weren't for the tight, stern expression on her face, then I could have presumed that she was passively taking this.

If it weren't for -

"And why the hell does she have a black eye?"

"What?" Julien's face crumpled and Lucille merely shrugged, pushing herself up into a sitting position and brushing a speck of brick dust from her deep green gown.

"The man appointed to arrest me was rather careless with his hands." She answered dryly, "so, naturally, I hit him. And he hit me back. In the face."

"So now you're allowing the guards to assault prisoners? Who haven't even committed a crime?" I asked Julien pointedly, watching him sigh and grimace slightly.
"I can give you ten minutes to speak with her." Julien said before turning on his heel and making his way back down to the gate we'd just walked through, quietly talking to the guards who were stationed there.

I turned back to Lucille, watching her carefully crack each of her knuckles and almost winced as the sound reverberated across the stone. Markus hadn't spoken since he'd made me aware of the slight skirmish he had been involved with yesterday and this complete silence from him was unnerving. He might not agree with what I was doing but I didn't care. He didn't have to be here; if he wanted to, he could easily walk away.

Lucille was strong, I knew that. I knew what people said about her, knew the hearsay that followed her like a disease and how she would never bat an eyelid at any of it. Lucille was strong but not impenetrable.

The darkness of her bruises contrasted with the paleness of her skin, the paleness of her usually dark features. She was sitting on her hands, her arms locked stiffly by her sides. I bit my lip as I forced my anger down into my stomach.

"Is there anything we can get you?" I said firmly, knowing that the last thing Lucille needed right now was a bread basket and Julien probably wouldn't even allow me to give it to her but I had to ask. I had to feel more powerful than I really was and that was powerless.

Lucille looked up from where she'd been staring at the wall, her deep grey eyes hard and sharp.

"Wine." Her voice was blunt, cold, humorless. And yet I forced myself to smile.

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"So your grand plan is to force a council meeting and demand that they release her? They're not going to do that - "

"Then I'm going to make them." I retorted sharply, storming towards the double doors that would open to reveal the council chamber. I'd made the request for a meeting ten minutes ago and they had kept me wandering the perimeter of the castle as they assembled the members. Anyone could request a council meeting during the day time, though no one ever tended to. "There is no way that Lucille was responsible for this. Their evidence makes no sense and the only reason she is in prison is because other people are getting antsy. That's no way to run a kingdom - "

The grand oak doors opened to reveal the twelve members of the council, including Hestia, whose sharp, narrow eyes were wholly focused on me. Each of the council members had decades of political and military experience to their name and were highly valued by Caspian for advice, or so Markus told me. I didn't exactly know why - the majority of them still held traditional and, in my mind, out-dated ideas about not only how a kingdom should be run but how the inhabitants of that kingdom should live their lives.

I felt Markus straighten up next to me as he raised his head; I'd told him frankly as we had made our way back from the prison that if he didn't support Lucille, or my campaign, then he could have no part in it. He'd responded by saying that while he didn't support Lucille, he supported me.

For the second time today, I was glad that I had chosen to wear my thicker and more elaborate purple satin gown as I walked forwards, the jewels at my neck shining in the pale light and my feet clattering on the floor. I needed to utilise every ounce of respect and grandeur my appearance could grant me.

"What is the meaning of this, Lady Howard?" Hestia half-shrieked. She had never once addressed
me as Lady Georgiana, which was my official title. Lady Howard implied that I was not only married to Markus but also that she cared for little other than my family status rather than my value as a person. That sounded about right...

They were all so predictable. If it had been Markus who had requested the meeting, they would have welcomed him with open arms.

My eyes snagged on the thirteenth chair, however, the intricate golden throne positioned at the head of the semi-circle. Caspian's throne.

Shit.

He had not yet arrived and judging from the unamused looks the other council members were wearing, I had run out of time to stall with. I would have to start my claim without him, even if I had been wholly relying on appealing to his better nature.

"I am asking for an appeal on the arrest of Lady Lucille Mariel - "

"That appeal is denied, Lady Howard." Hestia said abruptly, her tone casual. I met Markus' gaze for a brief second before turning back to address the council.

Well then. That was quick.

"Why would Lady Mariel seek to kill a man who owed her money? She wishes to reclaim the payment and a dead man cannot pay - "

"Because she is overly passionate and volatile." Sir Abraham said flatly, the pale yellow of his clothes sapping what life was left from his pallid skin.

The implications behind his words were clear; he thought that because she was courtesan she was some coquettish, ribald harpy with no honour.

I thought he was a sexist pig.

"And that is a well know fact, Lady Howard, that you cannot correct me on. Any woman who opens herself up to - "

"I would suggest you do not finish that sentence, Sir Abraham, or you shall find yourself to be the one with a black eye vanquishing in a cell." I snapped, his eyes widening. He was doubt thinking that her resemblance was clear in my own countenance but I didn't care. He could go to hell.

"I would urge you to take Lady Georgiana's advice, Sir Abraham."

I whipped around, instantly dropping into a curtsey as the council members rose to their feet. Markus shuffled backwards a little so he was now standing in line with me, meeting my eye as I rose from my curtsey. His expression appeared to be serious yet there was something of a smirk playing on his lips.

Finally, somebody I could talk some sense to.

"I apologise for my lateness, I had to resolve an incident involving some feuding lords." Caspian said, with a vague wave of his hand. These 'incidents' seemed to happening with alarming frequency.

"We were just listening to Lady Georgiana's appeal, Your Majesty." Lord Heath said as Caspian passed me, taking his position on his throne. There was no mention of how Hestia had appeared to veto me in the first minute of me speaking.
"So I understand." Caspian said with a smile, turning his attention to me and I had to remind myself just exactly what I was doing here. I wasn't here to be amicable; I was here to get something that was due. "Lady Georgiana - "

"Lady Mariel did not kill Sir Randell and I can prove it."

"How?" Hestia barked and I swallowed down my retort. There would be time for that later.

"I can prove that the crimes are related." I said, ignoring the inquiring and dubious looks the other council members were giving me. "And if you are suggesting that my aunt would butcher a unicorn and tie it to my bedpost in the middle of the night then I would suggest you visiting a doctor to be prescribed a tonic."

"How can you prove the crimes are related?" Caspian asked.

"By checking Sir Randell's chamber for a clue that was also found at the crime scene in my chamber." I said pointedly, knowing that only Caspian and Hestia were likely to have knowledge as to what this clue was and, like Caspian had said, I didn't want to be the cause of a religious uprising. "I am presuming you are yet to do this, your Majesty."

"I've been otherwise occupied." He said, a slightly sheepish look on his face which I found remarkably endearing.

"I'll have to complete the task myself then."

"Sir Randell's chamber is closed to all but a few." Hestia barked as I turned to move. Of course I'd considered this...

"Then you shall have to accompany me, your Majesty." There was a moment of silence as the council members all exchanged a look but the only person who I was really interested in was Caspian. It was his approval that mattered, that would shatter my appeal if he did not agree.

"I suppose I shall."

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Being inside Sir Randell's chamber was unsettling to say the least. All the evidence of the crime had been removed so there was nothing outward to suggest what had happened.

And yet I still felt as though I was seeing something that I shouldn't.

"Where was he found?" I asked, stepping further inside the room as Caspian carefully closed the door behind him. In my dreams the first time I was alone in a bedchamber with the King was for a very different purpose.

"On the bed, face down. We already checked the bedframe when we found the body. Nothing."

"I don't think they would do it the same way twice." I said, slowly turning so that I could scan every inch of Randell's large, if somewhat cluttered, chamber.

"How did you even realise they were connected?" I bit my lip to stop myself from immediately answering. If I was perfectly honest, I wasn't certain that they were but I had needed something in order to free Lucille from prison.

"They must be," I said, finally. "I don't believe in coincidences." This wasn't a lie, exactly, just not the whole truth.

"I didn't want to arrest your aunt, you know." Caspian said, his voice sincere as he looped a hand
around the bedpost. "But I was backed into a corner. I had to do something - "

"I know. I know how hard it can be to act like a leader, when everyone is looking to you for your answers and you're utterly clueless. But you've got to think of something. I get it. I still think you're being a fool, however."

I had checked the bookcase, the side table, the dresser. There was no sign of the symbol that Karinna had found carved into my bedpost. I refused to believe that it wasn't here, however. It had to be. So where had I not -

"I'm so stupid." I murmured quietly, hurriedly kneeling onto the floor and lifting up the fur rug that covered the floor. Caspian stepped forwards to see what I was doing, a look of confusion on his face.

There it was. This symbol was the same that had been carved into my bedpost, only bigger, the cuts ingraining themselves deeper into the wood. It would have taken someone a long time and considerable effort. They had probably carved it while Randell was still bleeding out on his bed.

"So this is religious..." Caspian muttered in dread and I pushed myself to my feet, cautious of keeping my balance so that I didn't fall into a table in front of the King.

"Someone is going to a lot of effort to make it look that way."

"So, it is?"

"No it's not. It's something more than that."
I'd spent the whole morning cleaning the King's favourite pair of riding boots and by the time I was able to make my way over to his chambers to replace them in his wardrobe, clean and freshly shining, my hands were stinging from a combination of the soap and the wind that chapped my skin.

Because of my very exciting morning, I had also missed the one piece of news that every servant had been counting down the days to hear: the servants ball had officially been announced to take place in a few days time. On my way back from the servants quarters, I'd passed Lysa in the kitchens panicking to one of her friends that she didn't have anything to wear. Little did she know that I'd already thought of this had put my grand plan to give her the Yule gift that she wanted into action.

I had known that she wanted a dress for almost a year now, ever since she'd come moping into the stables one morning because the stain in her dress wasn't going anywhere. So, a couple of days ago before the fiasco about Sir Randell and the Lakosians had worked everybody up into a frenzy, I'd talked to Georgie about my idea and, as a joint present, Georgie was going to sew her a dress. I was going to get her another present as well, that one I hadn't quite figured out yet, but I knew that she was going to love it. When it was finished.

I'd managed to get her exact measurements from her mother when I'd been taking over some firewood one evening and Lysa had been helping her brothers get ready for bed. The issue now wasn't anybody spoiling the surprise because I knew that neither her mother nor Georgie would tell her but rather stopping Lysa from panicking so much about not having a dress to the point that I felt so guilty and told her myself. I'd come rather close to this on various occasions in the past and had had to stop myself at the last minute. That wasn't going to happen this time, however. I wasn't going to let her guilt-trip me into something that she didn't even know about.

I passed the pairs of guards that were stationed outside the King's chambers and paused for a moment as I readjusted my grip on the boots. I didn't want to step through the doorway only to drop them on the rug. I caught the sound of voices murmuring behind the door as I ran a hand through my ruffled hair. I'd presumed that the King would still be in his council meeting or whatever had called him to hurry from his rooms earlier.

I'd heard about the arrest of Lady Mariel, Georgie and Markus' aunt from one of the guards that I was friendly with and Lysa had repeated the information to me when I'd passed her in the kitchen. Georgie, understandably, wasn't too happy about this and had been fighting to get her released - hence, or so I presumed, the council meeting that I was betting she had called. Markus, apparently, didn't entirely know where he stood on the matter and, according to Lysa, had been acting rather hostile to the whole prospect. I couldn't quite understand that but, then again, I knew that at one time Lady Mariel had been practically an estranged relative and reconnecting must have been quite difficult.

Georgie, on the other hand, had never seemed to have that problem.

I knocked softly on the door, hearing the voices inside suddenly cease before a familiar "come in." I pushed open the door, starting to speak before I had even fully entered the room.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, your Majesty, I was just returning your boots." I bit back my surprise as I entered the room to find Queen Estella lounging on the chair opposite the King, a glass of what I
presumed was wine in her hand, and a smile on her face.

She was dressed in another elaborate creation - Lysa had been trying to figure out how the Lakosians made their clothes - made from dark pink and red silk, her hair tied into a glossy rope down her back and a selection of white jewels sparkling around her neck. I wasn't blind to her beauty or elegance - I really would have to be blind not to notice it - but there was something about the grandeur and resplendence that seemed to follow her like a cloud of smoke that terrified me a little.

Was this diplomatically proper? To be having a personal meeting with a foreign queen accompanied by no extra guards, no other diplomats? Then again, they were royalty and could do whatever they liked but I still thought there would be ripples of surprise if I were stupid enough to let information of their private meeting slip.

"Thank you, Tristan." The King replied, drawing his eyes away from Queen Estella for a split second before returning them to her. She was a woman that made it impossible for you to draw your eyes away from her. That much was clear.

I made my way over to where the chests and wardrobe were that contained all of the King's clothes, knowing that if Mrs. Boweson saw me she would accuse me of loitering. I knelt down in front one of the oak chests, taking the pile of clothes that one of the laundry maids must have delivered earlier and starting folding everything again. I liked to do everything myself and, if I was being completely honest, it gave me an excuse to watch the interaction between the King and Queen Estella.

"I'll leave you be, now." She said, rising from the chair and straightening out her voluminous skirts.

"Are you sure?" The King asked, a somewhat nervous smile on his face. Because Queen Estella could turn any man, even the king, into an awkward, blushing boy. "You don't need to go - "

"No, I have people that I wish to speak with. I enjoyed your company immensely, however." I averted my eyes as the King swept her hand up in his own and brought it to his lips. I spotted the half-empty wine decanter that was sat on the side table; I would have to refill that later in case he planned on having any more ahem...personal meetings with the queen. The pair of them had been rather cosy, from the looks of things. If I spoke of this, however, I'd have a slipper thrown at my head.

The King closed to door after Queen Estella vanished into the corridor, her footsteps seemingly silent as she moved. I heard him let out a sigh and, as he turned around, I met his gaze and found myself smirking despite myself. He rolled his eyes and started to make his way over to the armchair that he had claimed as his favourite.

"I'm not saying anything." I defended, watching as he reached for his wine glass and drained it before turning on his heel and settling down at the dining table, a collection of books spread out in front of him. No matter how often I tried to organize them into a neat pile, my effort was always redundant.

"Good because nothing happened."

"I never suggested anything did happen."

"I'm just trying to be...nice." The King admitted as I reached for the second pile of laundry, this one mainly pillow cases and bed linen. "But the conversation started to feel a little - " He sighed and I found myself smirking again.

"Awkward, because she started flirting with you." If Mrs. Boweson could hear me, she really would
box my ears but the King never expected me to be anything other than myself, annoying, sarcastic humour and all. He'd told me on several occasions that he enjoyed it because it mercifully contrasted with the formal goings on of court and made him feel more like a human rather than just a figurehead.

The King rolled his eyes again but remained silent. He wasn't exactly denying it -

"Do you like her?" I knew that I was treading into dangerous ground now. Dangerous because I could cause a diplomatic incident if I got too drunk at the servants ball and spilled any of the information.

"Like is a peculiar word," The King said slowly. We'd had this conversation many times about how he felt like he could never truly like or dislike someone for his own personal reasons because the fate of his kingdom was relying on his opinion. "But yes. I do."

"Do you think she is trying to steal your throne? Because - " I hurried on, cautious of the raised eyebrow that he was now shooting in my direction, "some people that you have tried to make alliances with in the past have done that."

"I don't think so, no."

"Then, in my book, she's lovely. And, at the very least, if you have to go along with this strange, kind-of-flirting relationship, you have the chance of making an extra friend." The King was silent for a moment before turning to fully face me.

"You always know what to say, don't you? You always have good advice."

"And yet I still have absolutely no clue what I'm doing in regards to women."

"You've been with Lysa for nearly a year - " He pointed out and I smiled at the memory.

"Entirely by accident." I grinned. "I'm still waiting for her to realise what a complete fool I am." This was completely and utterly true. I was the luckiest man alive that, somehow, Lysa had managed to put up with me for almost a year and I still didn't really know what she saw in me. I was just happy that she liked what she'd found.

Why was I even having this conversation with the King? He could have any woman that he wanted; he could have any woman on the planet. And yet he would still blush and transform from a confident leader into a shy child whenever he had to talk to one of the young women he admired.

"What are you reading, sire?" I asked, pushing myself to my feet. He was always reading to the point that I knew if there weren't three books inside his chamber at all times then something was deeply wrong with him and the type of book he was reading could give an indication of how he was feeling. Still, I liked to appear interested and it gave me the opportunity to pick up facts that I could later impress the other servants with.

I approached the table, stacking the empty plates in order to take them back to the kitchens and saw him pause for a minute. "Something about the history of Lakosians."

"So you like Queen Estella but you're paranoid about her envoys."

"Paranoid is a strange word." He repeated and I found myself smirking. "I'd just like to know more about their heritage, that's all. I want to know who I'm dealing with and whether the rumours about them possessing magical abilities have any merit."

I hesitated for a moment, my eyes scanning the book that he was now flicking through. Magic. The
prospect of people possessing magic was one that created quite a stir among the castle, despite the
fact there were talking badgers and mice walking around which gave people no trouble at all.

I hadn't know about these rumours, however, and this was probably a diplomatic move. They didn't
want to...unnervy anybody.

"Queen Estella has magic? And her people?"
"I don't know." The King had answered, looking up from the page he was reading. "I haven't asked
her, seeing as I'm trying to be polite. But it seems that her ancestors had magical abilities so it would
make sense for the trait to have passed down the family line. There are some stories about them - "

"What kind of stories?" I asked, my voice harsher than I intended. I needed to calm down; I couldn't
let myself get swept up in the ideas of the rest of court. I needed to hold my own. I wasn't going to be
nervous or afraid of something that I didn't even know if it existed, didn't even understand yet.

"Some about her people being able to control minds, read minds - " So the intrusive, manipulative
kind of magic? Great. The court would love this if the truth ever got out. especially because it was
the kind of magic that would be very difficult to identify as you couldn't physically see it.

"They might be reading our minds and we wouldn't even know." I murmured and I saw the King's
eyes grow firm.

"I'd appreciate it if you kept this knowledge to yourself." He said sternly and I nodded.

"Yes, sire." I needed to calm down. I wasn't going to follow in my parents footsteps of being afraid
of everything that they found new and unknown. There wasn't actually evidence that they did have
magical abilities, it was just all stories, and nothing had happened for me to think otherwise. I needed
to keep my head.

- Things are getting more and more complex as time goes on. What do you think will happen next?
Any thoughts? Thanks for reading!
Chapter 25

Lady Karinna Sternwood

I carefully turned the page of the book that was in my hands, the pages delicate and fragile underneath my fingertips. The book clearly had a substantial age to it, judging from the miniscule writing and faded illustrations that dotted each page and it was taking a considerable amount of effort to decode each section, much longer than I had been expecting. I cast a wary glance over at Georgie who was perched on a chair facing me, her eyes pinned onto the swaths of pale forest green fabric that were spilling over her knee and onto the table top.

She'd explained her plot to me that both she and Tristan had conjured in order to create Lysa a dress for the servants ball whilst I'd been gathering the books I wanted to first try looking through for any helpful information. She had insisted on accompanying me in my research, despite my protests that the library could often be quite cold and I didn't want to bring on another of her migraines. I was grateful for the company however, at least for the most part, and it seemed like I didn't need to have any concerns about Georgie noticing just what sections of the book I was taking note of because she was so immersed in the spacing between her stitches.

"I need to show that I have at least some helpful ladylike qualities - " She murmured, catching my eye for a brief moment as I paused over the page, "because no man will ever wish to marry me otherwise."

We both knew that Georgie had no interest in marrying a man who only cared about how many ladylike exploits she could excel in and that, along with her rather more unorthodox abilities, she was very accomplished in many disciplines, despite whatever jokes she made about the unevenness of her stitches.

I was glad, really, about her studious attention to detail. It meant she hadn't harbored me with questions about all the books I decided to remove from their shelves because, as well as picking out several that I was hoping could tell me more about the mysterious symbol that had been found at both the site of Sir Randell's murder and Georgie's incident, I was also reading up on the magic that was rumored to be flowing through the Lakosians veins.

Or, as many books regarding magic that I could manage to get my hands on without arousing too much suspicion. With all the tension that had been brewing recently, the tension that most people were choosing to pretend didn't exist, many people had begun to feel slightly on-edge regarding magic and I knew people would probably have something to say if they discovered that I'd been reading as many books as I could find about the topic.

I wasn't sure exactly how the knowledge had started to be circulated regarding the Lakosians supposed magic abilities, whether it had been a scholarly noble or gossiping servant who had been the root, but that didn't really matter. All that mattered was that it had.

That was why I had been spending so much of my free time in the library - not that anybody had really noticed - because I didn't want to take the books back to my chamber and have their titles traced back to my name. If I kept them within the library walls, then they couldn't be traced back to me.

I really had spent far too long learning the intricacies of court life, hadn't I? Father's teachings were going to be forever ingrained within my mind: to always watch your back and keep an eye on the
people who could wish to hurt you if the wind changed. Part of me hated that I could bring them to mind so easily, so quickly, but there was little I could do about it now, other than make the information useful.

Aside from keeping her eyes pinned on her creation, Georgie was checking the large clock that hung above the library door what seemed like every other minute. The King had promised that, after her impassioned speech and rousing appeal, he would have her aunt released in a couple of hours and Georgie seemed intent on holding him down to the minute on his statement.

I had always been wary towards Lady Lucille, even though I knew she was Georgie's aunt, on account of the fact that she somehow managed to know everything about practically everyone who lived in the castle and how she used the other courtesans like her own personal brigade of spies.

Whatever my personal feelings, however, she was Georgie's aunt and I was going to support her. I had to admit that I found it difficult to imagine that Lady Lucille could have acted in such a way to her only living niece, no matter her connections inside the castle.

I turned the page again, squeezing my eyes shut before opening them again. The tiny writing was beginning to strain my eyes.

Georgie checked the time on the clock again before resuming her stitching. Speaking of family, I hadn't spoken to Father since we had returned from the hunt yesterday evening and while I knew he was probably very busy, now more than ever considering the recent events of the last few days, in trying to find out who was responsible for Sir Randell's murder as well as training the guards and attending strategic meetings I was beginning to feel as though every step forward that we made, whether that was an particularly emotional conversation or arranging something together, was another two steps backwards in the long run.

"So you're okay now? Your migraine's gone?" Georgie nodded, pushing some of her hair over her shoulder.

"Yes, I'm fine." She said firmly, a smile coming to her lips. "Which is a shame because I'm sure it was very dramatic for everybody involved."

"Very dramatic and irritating. Her Grace was complaining about how you disrupted Sir Randell's crime scene." Georgie rolled her eyes and murmured something under her breath. This was yet another reason that we could add to the rather long list of reasons why we didn't particularly like the Duchess of Irvington. She had to be granted credit, however, for securing so much power amid a male dominated environment. The difficulty of that couldn't be ignored by either of us, even if other people chose to.

"If this whole situation with trying to get the King to marry Queen Estella results in a war, then I'm going to be the one who gets the blame for it." Georgie said, placing her sewing needle down for a moment and resting her head on her hand.

"Do you think he would go through with it? The marriage?" I knew how hurt Georgie would feel if the marriage really did develop into something more, even though she would try and convince me that she wasn't.

"It's not up to me." She said with a shrug. "If the benefits out-weigh the problems then possibly. He has to do what he feels would be best for the kingdom - "

I remained silent for a moment, watching as Georgie resumed her careful stitching. We didn't even need to mention Georgie's feelings on this matter - we were both more than aware of what they were.
She had harbored a growing affection for the King for the last couple of years and she would never speak much about it, other than when she had been drinking a substantial amount of wine or was wholly commenting on his dashing appearance. She claimed that he would never chose to marry the heiress of a tiny town anyway so there was no real point on dwelling what couldn't be.

I could see how deeply her affection ran, however, merely by studying her expression whenever she would mention him; she would start smiling, her eyes would widen, a faint blush appearing on her cheeks. I would go as far as to say that she her feelings were bordering on love; a love that had been gained by staring at him from a distance but no matter.

Whenever I voiced these feelings on the matter, Georgie would remind me that love was a very strong word.

I suddenly met Georgie's gaze, both of us hearing the same thing: the sound of heavy, thudding approaching footsteps. I silently closed the book that was in my hands, quickly moving it to the bottom of my pile and grabbing another title just as a figure moved through the shelves and halted at the head of our table.

"I thought I would find you here." I cast my eyes down against the words on the page, as though I was deeply engrossed in the chapter that I was, in reality, only scanning over. I was certain every single one of our conversations began in this way and I noticed the defiant straightening of Georgie's shoulders as she leaned back in her chair. She knew of my troublesome relationship with my father and I knew there was no way he would be able to worm his way out using his favourite empty excuses. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing much." I admitted, pulling down the sleeves of my cream gown just for something to do with my hands. I didn't want him to start inquiring about the books I was reading. I didn't want to drag him into whatever the situation was that was brewing beneath the pages.

"Can I speak to you during the ball?" The King was arranging another ball in the Lakosians honor, probably in an effort to erase the previous one from their minds. I nodded.

"Of course." I doubted whether he would even remember this promise; he would either be consumed by his duties or drink far too much wine to keep this thinking straight.

"That is, if I can get a word in." He said with a good natured smile. "There'll be too many lords vying for a dance with you." I didn't respond, merely smiled a little and cast my eyes back down to my book. After another moment he was gone, his boots echoing off the wooden floor. I could feel Georgie staring at me, a irritated look on her face. We both knew there certainly were not hoards of lords vying for a dance with me. There was barely a handful.

"He's lying." I said quickly, just as Georgie opened her mouth, surely to make a comment about his assumptions about my romantic life. "I know his ticks and he's feeling tense about something. There's something on his mind. His left hand clenches and he raises his eyebrows more than any normal person should. He's lying about something - "

"How about I go and follow him?" Georgie asked, checking the time on the clock again before turning back to me. I narrowed my eyes and shook my head.

"No, because then you'll get in trouble and - "
"And what?"

"He might just be feeling tense because of Sir Randell's death. He must have a lot on his plate at that moment - "

"You just said that he's keeping something to himself."

"There's always a first time to be wrong." I shot back and Georgie gave me a hard look, her mouth curving into a smirk before she pushed her chair away from the table and stood. "Where are you going?"

"The King has had his couple of hours to release Lucille." She said, carefully folding the fabric into a neat square and placing her needle and pouch of thread on the top. "And if I happen to come across your father as I'm making my way across the castle, then that will just be a coincidence, won't it?"

The look on her face, the shine in her eyes and the determined smirk on her face told me that it would be anything but a coincidence.
Chapter 26

Lady Georgiana Howard

Unfortunately, Sternwood took a different corridor that led away from the chambers of the important court figures and towards the castle courtyard once we had climbed from the shadowy corridor where the library was located. I felt more than inclined to divert my path and to follow in his footsteps, despite Karinna's protests, but I knew that I needed to focus on Lucille at the present moment. She was the one who would suffer if I didn't act today; I felt sure an 'accidental' black eye would only be the start of it.

I was going to kill that guard. I would kill all of them who assumed her past and her occupation made her fair game for their taunts and their ego boosts. Of course, it wasn't all the guards who acted in this fashion - in fact, it probably wasn't even close to half - but that didn't matter. It was enough guards to leave her in a state where I couldn't be sure if Julien's promises about her safety would be adhered to our not if I left her alone much longer.

Some men in this city seemed to presume that they were above the law, above the authority that everybody else lived by. But they wouldn't be above me, no matter how harshly they might whisper about me.

That didn't mean I was simply letting Sternwood off the hook, however. If he thought he could maintain a relationship with his daughter through one minute conversations every other day, then I would have to remind him that Karinna deserved better than that. She had deserved better than that for the last two years and I had waited long enough for him to move out of his 'grieving period'. His wife was dead but his daughter most certainly wasn't.

I ignored the guards who were stationed at the end of the corridor and moved swiftly past them, sweeping my hair over my shoulders and pinching my lips together. There were two pairs of guards stationed directly outside the door to the King's chambers too, no doubt the extra security having been implemented in wake of the recent attacks.

The added guards meant that, at the very least, the King was inside his chambers. There was a swirling ball of anxiety brewing in my stomach as I slowed my pace, a kind of anxiety that I had never felt around the King before. Lucille's life could be hanging in the balance and it would all depend on the words I was about to say. I knew the majority of the lords in the council were already against my appeal, meaning that my words now had to have even greater gravity.

I had to do this. I couldn't simply...leave her to be hurt further, no matter what Markus thought. I had tried to find him before I settled in the library to continue stitching Lysa's dress together but had suspended my mission after ten minutes of searching. He didn't want to help Lucille so he didn't have to; I wasn't going to waste my own energy and force him to act. I could handle the issue myself.

I rapped my knuckles on the door, the sound echoing down the silent corridor. The guards were supposed to remain practically motionless, to not pay attention to the comings and goings outside the King's chambers - unless they posed a threat to him, of course. And yet, I could feel their eyes quickly flitting between my face and the wall opposite. Low status nobles weren't exactly supposed to go knocking at the King's door.

But I didn't care. I had given him, and the rest of the council, their time.

The door swung open and I felt my heart leap into my throat. It was Caspian, seeming even more tall...
and imposing than he usually did with his expression steely and eyes set. I knew that he had several inches on me - he was slightly taller than Markus after all - but I had never felt so small and insignificant to stand beside him. This was clearly his diplomatic setting.

In the room behind him I could see Lord Julien and his mother, both sat rigidly upright. Not that I expected vastly different behavior from them but...

I swallowed hard, pushing down my nerves and any comments I might want to make about how attractive this determined attitude was on him and how much I wanted to touch his hair.

"Lady Georgiana." He said somewhat stiffly, his face relaxing a little as he reached to adjust one of the ornamental rings he sometimes wore. "If you were looking for an audience with me then I'm afraid that I'm not alone at the present -"

There was no wavering in his tone; he might have asked me a question but he knew exactly what I was doing at his door. I raised my chin and met his gaze more firmly.

"I don't mind. That just means I have witnesses to what I wish to say." I kept my gaze focused on Caspian, knowing that if I looked over at Hestia I might just lose my nerve. I saw a flicker of something pass over his face, either shock at my impertinence or humour, before he stepped back and allowed me to pass into his chambers.

That was half the battle, I supposed. At least he hadn't left me standing in the corridor looking like a fool.

While Julien seemed to be hiding his amusement at my presence, Hestia's expression was much harder to read. Her eyes were sharp and narrow, pinned on my figure as I stepped further into the room and Caspian closed the door. I was taller than her by handful of inches yet there was something so threatening about the tightness in her frame, the fury she hid inside her small proportions.

What had they been talking about? This seemed to be a rather informal style of council meeting with, arguably, the two most powerful members of said council. Had their meeting been for pleasure rather than business? Or had the contents of the meeting been something that they hadn't wanted the other members to know about?

Julien smiled in my direction and inclined his head, something that could have simply been an accident but I felt sure was supposed to be an subtle bow and show of respect. I had no chance of winning my appeal while talking to Hestia.

"You said that you would have my aunt released from prison in a couple of hours, your Majesty." I started, turning to face him. I was going to have to be somewhat polite about this or Hestia would have me thrown from the room in an instant. "So where is she?"

"You clearly do not understand the complexities of the situation, Lady Georgiana." Hestia interrupted and I almost paused her to comment on her referral to me as Lady Georgiana rather than Lady Howard for perhaps the first time in her entire life. "The King cannot possibly just release Lady Lucille Mariel, there - ."

"With all due respect, Your Grace, yes he can. He is the King." I wasn't going to achieve anything by fighting with Hestia about what the King was allowed to do and what he wasn't.

"I understand that you are being pressured from every direction." I said sincerely because I did. My experience governing Wedgemore might not be quite as substantial as running a kingdom but it was effectively the same principle. Different people had different goals, different priorities and, as leader,
you were expected to cater to all of them. "People want to feel safe, to be reassured that something is being done about Sir Randell's murder but imprisoning an innocent person based on evidence that not only makes little sense but is also completely inconsequential is not the way to achieve that."

"How do you know that Lady Lucille is innocent?" Hestia cut in and I wanted to sigh. I felt as though I had repeated myself about a hundred times by now and still, the message apparently wasn't yet clear.

Julien, cleverly, was remaining silent and listening to what was being said rather than imposing in on the conversation. At this moment, it was difficult to see the family resemblance between him and his mother.

"Because Sir Randell's murder and the incident in my chamber are connected, judging from the identical symbols that we found at each crime scene." I'd wanted to keep this detail to myself for as long as possible so not to start a tirade of religious hatred but it was clear I was going to have to if I wanted Hestia to listen to what I was going to say. I looked over at Caspian and raised an eyebrow at him. He was the only one who could confirm my story.

"I saw them." He said with a nod, filling the palpable silence that hung in the air. Julien's expression remained stoic - I knew that Karinna had told him about the symbol she found in my chamber and Caspian must have made him aware about the one found in Randell's chamber too. Had Hestia known about the discovery? Her expression was giving nothing away.

At least she now knew that I wasn't making this whole charade up just to gain some attention. As if I would actually make something like this up.

"And while I may not be exceptionally close with my aunt, I do know one thing." I held Caspian's gaze. I was not backing out of this. "There is absolutely no way that she would butcher a unicorn and tie its head to my bedpost. Firstly, she doesn't have the strength to do that and she definitely doesn't know how to go about tracking one, nor does she have the motivation because she would not act so maliciously to a member of her own family."

An act like this also didn't have the sort of financial incentives that usually guided her endeavors. I was not about to bring this point to their attention, however. This would not help her case or strengthen her character.

"Putting an innocent person inside a jail cell is not the way to keep protestors at bay or to placate the Lakosians. The way to do that is by solving the crime, and the longer that Lucille is in prison - " I took a deep breath, mentally planning on the direction that my words were going to take. Caspian was looking pensive; my words seemed to be settling somewhere inside his brain. I needed to give him an ultimatum. I needed to - "And the longer Lucille remains behind those bars, then the longer I am going to stay right here and shout at you so you'll, ultimately, have less time to focus on the case. So, what's it to be, your Majesty?"

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I kept my eyes fixed ahead of me, attempting to cool the exhilarated flush that had bloomed across my cheeks as I'd been speaking. I needed to seem composed and confident, not the half-breathless, thankful mess that I really was.

My speech had worked. There had been something inside my words that had convinced the King of Lucille's innocence and the wrongness of his actions. I had won.

And now he was escorting me to the prisons to give the order for Lucille to be released.
It had been worth it just to see the self-satisfied, unruffled exterior of Hestia drop for a moment. She'd protested against the King's action, reminding him of some words they had previously exchanged, but the King had been sure of his decision.

I could have cried with relief. Lucille was going to be fine. She was going to be okay.

Now I just had to adapt to the strange development that seemed to have grown between me and the King. I couldn't explain it, I had no words for what had appeared between us within his chamber, but I was feeling something that I couldn't name that hadn't existed before. I had seen him question himself, seen his decision making progress at hand and seen the impact and guidance that he took from Hestia and Julien.

He now seemed a little less imposing, a little more...real.

I still found him to be devastatingly handsome, however. That would never change.

"How long have you been practicing that speech?" I almost startled at his words, attempting to calm my hasty breathing. I was riding along on the triumph and sense of achievement and the way our hands almost brushed against each others as we walked down the corridor.

I was greatly tempted to cross my arms.

"I'm sorry?"

"That speech. It was quite impressive the way you handled yourself." He was looking at me, a small smirk on his face and a light red heat flushing his face. I presumed it was down to the fast pace at which we were walking.

"That was made up on the spot." I admitted after a moment, keeping my eyes fixed ahead of me. I didn't want to give away my emotions.

"You might have to have a word with my speech writers." He said, a light-hearted tone to his words. I didn't know how to reply. We were having a conversation that hadn't been forced by the situation - I wasn't stood near him at the dessert table, nor was I the victim of a crime. He was talking with me because he wished to.

"How are you faring?"

"What do you mean?" I chastised myself for how empty-headed I must have seemed to him. We passed down a staircase, a pair of guards halting and saluting him before continuing their ascent.

I was with the King. I was with the King of my whole damn country and I couldn't even form coherent sentences. He wasn't Caspian; he was my monarch, my sovereign, my ruler.

"I can't imagine that waking up to a butchered unicorn head and the knowledge that someone had been inside my chamber without my consent could be particularly relaxing." His voice was sincere, his naturally curious tone leaching out. But it was though a signal had suddenly been passed inside my head: I was walking with the King. The King.

"I'm fine, sire." I answered, almost wincing at how stiff and austere I sounded. He didn't reply for a moment, the stilted silence ringing in my ears like the chapel bells. I could feel his eyes on me, the understanding that I most certainly was not fine and that I was attempting to reinforce the façade that I had erected around myself. I swallowed the lump in my throat. "I've started locking my door at night." I admitted in a low voice. "Lysa has to bring her key with her every morning."
"I don't blame you, milady." The contrast of the informal words with the formal title was startling, as though he was attempting to keep some level of propriety among the rather intimate interaction that we were happening. Because he knew we weren't supposed to be interacting like this. My reservations about admitting my feelings were well founded, it seemed. "I'm going to find out what is going on."

"What I said before was not a criticism of you, your Majesty - "

"I know. But I am not going to allow one of my citizens to feel unsafe inside her own bedchamber."

- What do you think about Georgie's perceptions as to her and Caspian's relationship? How do we feel about Lucille? Thanks for reading!
That evening, there was yet another ball taking place in order to impress the Lakosians and to showcase the riches - and gallantry - that the Narnian court was dripping in. I was hoping that spirits would be higher than that of the previous ball and enough wine and mead was consumed to distract from the slight rift that seemed to be forming, not only between the Narnians and the Lakosians, but also between the Narnians themselves at how much the King and the council should be doing to try and find Randell's murderer and how much they had done already.

The answer to which was not a lot. I could hardly be too defiant however because the King had valued his words and Lucille was now walking around freely and I had no reason not to value his second promise: that he would find out what was going on and put a stop to it. I was surprised with myself that I was even able to remember his words, given the strange atmosphere that had existed between us when we had been walking down the corridor.

Some people seemed to think that the way to go about fixing the issue was to take matters into their own hands and to corner those they thought responsible and threaten them with pitchforks. This clearly wasn't the answer to the issue and those few people who had taken up arms had been severely reprimanded and threatened with imprisonment.

That was what Markus had told me when I'd seen him briefly after lunch; if he had heard about Lucille's release - and I was unsure about how he couldn't have - he didn't mention it. But the fact that he was even discussing the unrest with me showed that at least some of words had diffused into his head; I didn't like to be kept in the dark. I wanted to know all of the facts, regardless of how other people thought that would make me feel.

I had arrived at the ball earlier than I had intended to as a result of both Lysa's excellent organizational skills and the way Mrs. Boweson was ordering them to become ghost-like, be able to pass through walls and to be everywhere all at once. And while the hall was fairly empty with no one whom I had a burning desire to converse with currently present anyway, this provided me the perfect opportunity to subtly watch the comings and goings of everyone, from evaluating the colour of someone's suit to wondering why on a earth the Baroness of Merza would want to marry a man who permanently smelled of fish.

It was clear that nothing of note was going to occur, not until the King, Queen Estella and a few more interesting members of the court arrived. I glanced down at the wine glass in my hand, watching the deep liquid swell around in the goblet. At this rate, I was going to be the one becoming inebriated for the sole reason that there was nothing else for me to do. I had never quite reached the level of drunkenness that Markus had - though I had certainly attempted it - and I was already on my second glass of wine. The night was looking promising in that respect, if I needed any other motivation to stay in my position beside a pillar.

As I'd been reapplying my lip paint before leaving my chamber, I'd spotted that, for the first time, my rose had begun to look a little tired. The petals had lost something of their vibrancy and the overall blossom was beginning to droop a little over the rim of the vase. That had filled me with an overwhelming amount of confidence for tonight.

Some people were skeptical as to the true value of the roses and while I didn't freely talk about the subject much outside of my trusted inner circle, I did truly understand and believe in everything that Annalie did and the morals that she lived by. Even if she did spend the majority of her days confined
I swallowed another gulp of my wine, twirling a lock of my hair around my fingers. If Lysa were here, I knew that she would be shouting at me for ruining the carefully arranged style that she crafted my hair into to compliment my white gown - the outer layer was gauzy and almost translucent, with a delicate lace skirt and bodice underneath and large bell-shaped sleeves that tapered at the wrist. It wasn't something that would have normally chosen to wear, I received ample critique of my appearance without wearing something so form-fitting and low cut, but I had marveled at the way the fabric felt against my skin and the, I wasn't afraid to admit it, pleasing shape it created along my breasts and waist.

If only my head was simply filled with thoughts regarding my clothes and the silhouette fabrics created against my body. My life would be so much more straightforward then.

Thoughts of Karinna and her father had been filling my head all day, especially as Karinna seemed to be convinced that her father was keeping something from her. I wanted to know where he kept disappearing to because I felt sure a man couldn't possibly be that busy, especially given his age. He couldn't possibly train every hour of the day - if the question concerned Markus or Caspian who were physically able that amount of activity then that would be a different matter - but not a man who was in his mid-fifties. Not even a extremely fit and active one like Sternwood.

But why would he lie about his whereabouts? If he was only sitting in on council meetings, strategy meetings or training the soldiers then why did this result in so much secrecy? The only explanation that I could think of was if they were planning on declaring war on somebody in a maneuver that no one knew about. I should ask Markus whether he had heard anything among the gossip that the soldiers and other nobles exchanged on the training fields. He should have plenty to tell me seeing as he'd been spending every waking moment training. Did he know something? Was there actually going to be an attack somewhere and he was preparing himself?

Even though he'd become infinitely more busy in the last few days, there was no doubt in my mind about him attending the ball because I was certain that he would. So would Lucille, as she always did, but especially because she had just been released from prison and had lost almost twelve hours of business.

I looked up at the sound of heavy, thudding footsteps and instantly straightened my posture, feeling my heart begin to beat a little faster. The King swept into the room, followed by Hestia and a handful of assorted advisors and the members of the court that were already present dropped into curtsies or bows as he passed.

He was wearing the claret and gold jacket that I adored. As I raised my head, I caught his gaze for the briefest of moments and saw a smile on his face before he turned back to be greeted by Lord Heath.

I mentally chastised myself as I swallowed a gulp of wine. I was so deeply invested in my feelings for him that I couldn't even identify when he was simply being diplomatic; he smiled at everybody. He was the King, that was practically his primary role.

I carefully watched as he and Hestia conversed with Heath, a bevy of lords and advisors materializing around them. Karinna or Markus had better arrive soon or I was going to be so disinterested that I really would get drunk and I did not want to be the next Howard to vomit at Estella's feet. Lysa was serving her shift in the kitchens so there was no chance of her offering me a reprieve and I presumed this would be where Tristan was also.

I sighed and almost let my head slam back against the marble column. At the moment, the only being...
that was interested in me, other than the wine glass in my hand, was Sir Dawson. Because of course it bloody was.

I'd begrudgingly spotted him when I had arrived at the ball and he'd yet to change his position. He didn't need to change his position, however, because I could clearly see the way his watery grey eyes were fixed on my figure and I wanted to scream. Why did I always attract the men who, aside from being strange, were considerably more than double my age and could bore me to tears? That situation truly was dire, even given my past record, if the only man remotely interested in me was Sir Dawson. I could live without his riveting tales of fig farming.

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It was almost another half hour until Karinna walked through the imposing oak doors and I was almost at the point of conceding. I'd counted every single person who had entered the hall and hadn't been Karinna (one hundred and four) and had seriously been considering approaching Sir Dawson just to see how he would react. It seemed that all I had needed to do was to wait for my entertainment however because, walking side by side with Karinna as she entered the room, her golden hair shining, was Lord Julien.

How interesting.

As soon as Karinna locked her eyes upon me she pulled away from Julien's side and stormed towards me, leaving Julien blinking in her wake before he walked off towards Caspian. I raised an eyebrow at her, taking in the tightness in her frame and light blush dusting her cheeks.

"What was that?" I inquired lightly, looking over my shoulder to see Julien and Caspian engaged in frantic conversation, before turning back to Karinna.

"He just appeared," She said stiffly, folding her arms, "when I was walking from my chamber -"

"And?"

"We were talking about books and political theory -" Of course they had. "Why does he keep appearing?" Karinna seemed to be mostly frustrated in regards to Julien's affections because of course she saw him as more of a hindrance than someone who was kind and rather appealing to look at.

"Probably because he likes you and is struggling to be subtle about it." I wasn't blind, nor was Karinna, and we'd both taken note of how Julien always seemed to be close to her whenever there was a public event. "Maybe he's just that nice."

Karinna remained silent for a moment as she accepted a glass of wine from a nearby servant and we both looked over our shoulders at where Julien and Caspian were conversing. Caspian was grinning, a sight that made my stomach flutter, while Julien seemed to be almost agitated. I watched Karinna out of the corner of my eye - what did she really think of his attention? Her flustered nature would make me assume that she didn't find it as irritating as she made it out to be. But, then again, maybe she really did just find him annoying?

"He is rather nice to look at." I said slowly, adjusting my gaze to Karinna's face as Julien turned around so that he wouldn't catch me staring. She rolled her eyes but smiled.

"That he is."

"How about you graciously offer to dance with him?" I asked innocently, as Caspian and Julien were moving towards the center of the room where the dancing was taking place. Karinna smirked.
"Only if you go and dance with the King."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want to make a complete fool of myself when I get pushed to the side by another lady with higher standing and therefore more actual grounds to dance with him. I'm quite happy gazing at him from afar."

My whole 'relationship' with him had been born out of far-away glances and looks during balls and I was quite happy to maintain that - especially when he looked as dashing as he did tonight.

"They're starting that tedious circle dance in a moment." Karinna observed and I glared at her, knowing full well what she was about to attempt. She had been forced into this dance more times than I had and knew the arrangement better than she could dance it. "You don't need to enter with a partner. And, there's an even number of people so if we both join right now and you stand over there, you'll be able to dance with him - "

"And you'll have to dance with Lord Julien even though you just said no," I shot back. This situation was not happening. Karinna was not pushing me into this; I was usually the one who pushed others into things.

"I'm perfectly capable of staring into space for five minutes." Karinna said with a shrug, taking the empty wine glass from my hand and passing it to a servant along with her own before taking me by the crook of my elbow and leading me into the circle of nobles.

"I hate you - " I groaned into her ear before we were forced to split up and hold onto the forearms of the gentlemen on either side of us. Karinna smirked from where she was stood on the other side of the circle, as if to say the feeling was mutual.

We had both performed the dance so many times that we could have danced it in our sleep and, sure enough, her logic was effective as each woman broke away with the men on either side of her and joined with the man second on her left hand side. In Karinna's case this was Julien and in my case this was the King.

Oh boy.

I felt as though my heart was going to burst out of my chest as I reached upwards to clasp his shoulder and he slid his left hand around my waist. His breath was warm on my face, the heat of his skin sinking through the thin layers of my dress as he adjusted his grip slightly and smiled.

Shit. I had steps to remember. Now would not be the ideal time to step on his feet or trip over into him; the embarrassment would eat me alive and I was fairly sure the momentum would be enough to cause my breasts to spill out from the bodice of my dress.

"Lady Georgiana." His voice was warm and friendly and it was taking considerable effort on my part to concentrate on the steps of the dance as well as forcing my mind to stay focused. He looked so much more handsome up close -

"Your Majesty."

"I didn't know you enjoyed dancing so much." Did he have eyes? No, I couldn't say that -

"I love dancing." I said with a smile, feeling the ripple of his muscle under my palm. "But for some
reason I only ever attract the older gentlemen who wish to ask me."

"Ah," Caspian chuckled and I felt my skin begin to grow hot. Why did his laugh distract me so much? I focused my mind on the steps of the dance for a moment. I'd performed it countless times but I was beginning to worry that I would make a mistake somewhere.

"What is your age limit, then? For partners that are able to be considered?" Why on earth was he asking that? Would my answer offend him in some way? I knew that he was a couple of years older than myself but it wasn't a substantial enough amount to cause any issues. Why the hell did I know how old he was?

"Fifteen years." I said somewhat hesitantly, trying to judge his reaction.

"And what's that?" My heart really was going to rupture in a moment. It was the diplomatic smile - the one that dripped with charm and charisma and warmth - that was getting to me the most. It was the one he used to woo everybody, the one that Estella was undoubtedly falling for, because how could she not? It was that smile that would result in their marriage alliance.

Oh God. Was he a virgin?

I almost tripped over his foot as I tried to refocus my mind. Where had that thought come from? I could get beheaded for thinking that. That must count as treason. I did not want to think about that image. Or I did, but -

Not him and Estella. Together. Though I was sure he would be amazing at -

I completed the next set of steps without error, my mind whirring and my skin seeming to get hotter with every second that passed. I felt like everyone in the room was staring at me and criticizing the blush on my cheeks, the clumsiness of my steps, the colour of my gown.

Of course they were staring. I was dancing with the King.

"It's impolite to ask a lady's age." I said finally. "And aren't you supposed to know every single fact about your citizens? Including their age?" He pouted a little at my comment. Shit, that was cute.

"I know that you have a brother who is two years older than you." I raised an eyebrow, a smile slipping onto my face. That was not difficult information to come by. "And that Lucille Mariel is your maternal aunt."

A pang of something shot through me, something that wasn't surprise or embarrassment or anticipation. Did Caspian notice it? His smile faltered a little as he met my gaze and I swallowed, adverting my eyes to the dessert table at the back of the room.

It was sadness. Fear. Was he going to talk about my parents? How they died seven and four years ago, almost on this exact day? How my maternal uncle was...well -

"And my birthday?" There was no dangerous ground with this question. It would bring no awkward silences or unwanted questions or concerned looks.

"I actually know that one." He admitted, the smile reappearing on his face. I was torn between shock - the King was aware of my birthday? - and satisfaction - because of course he should know when my birthday was. There was nothing to read into with that information.

"Really?"
"Honestly!" He confirmed with a nervous smile. "I remember having an important council meeting that day a couple of years ago and Tristan told me. He must have heard it from Lysa because he was hanging onto her every word even then. The 3rd of September, I seem to remember."

He remembered my birthday. This was such a simple sentiment and I remembered countless people's birthdays but, for some reason, the knowledge that he knew, he knew, made my heart flutter.

Julien and Karinna passed by us - I had been so caught up in my own thoughts, I'd forgotten that it was their turn to move up the circle as part of the dance. I swallowed tightly, watching Karinna's composed figure twirl under Julien's arm. She didn't look flustered or panicked to be dancing with Julien.

But then, she never did look that way. I felt like the world was spinning under my feet, that I was one smile, one look away from falling. Why was I feeling so weak? So penetrable? Why did my feelings make me feel so feeble?

I needed to stop, to control myself, to stop being so bold, so brazen. I looked away from Caspian, blocked out the feeling of his hand on my waist, his breath on my skin.

It didn't matter anyway. What did I know? I wasn't worth it.
Chapter 28

Lady Lucille Mariel

I squeezed my lips together, glaring towards the retreating back of Orel as he disappeared among the crowd. He liked to think that he was most intelligent, able man in the room who could understand everyone's motives and knew exactly what everybody was plotting in their minds. In reality, he was an obnoxious pig who deserved to be hit with one of his own cannons that he had commissioned for the military.

He was a second-rate dancer as well, despite his perception being entirely the opposite.

I reached for a goblet of wine from a passing servant - Florina, she was a laundry maid who had been drafted in to serve at the ball - and gulped down the contents in a matter of swallows. I hadn't ceased talking since I had stepped foot inside the hall and my throat was feeling as dry as sandpaper. It didn't help that I was sure I had ingested an inordinate amount of dust during my tour of one of the cells.

I knew I should count myself lucky that nothing disastrous had happened in the twelve hours that I had been indisposed, if disastrous ignored the fact that I now had a black eye that I had been forced to cake in face powder. I was going to blacklist that guard from using any of the girls the second the ball was over, I hadn't memorized his facial features for no reason, and make his life a living embodiment of hellfire.

Not that I particularly wanted any of the girls to have to put up with him, seeing as he was a combative, disrespectful chauvinist who thought he could go around hitting anyone who bruised his self-conceit and that he was the ultimate male specimen.

Sadly, he wasn't the only man around court who existed within that mindset.

Florina passed by me again, taking my empty goblet with her and I carefully watched her disappear out of the room. I knew her sister more than she, though apparently she had a tendency to be late for her shift on Thursdays. That was interesting, particularly as this was the day some of the soldiers tended to train in the courtyard. Some ogling going on, perhaps? Or an ill-advised affair?

I let my eyes wander around the room, searching for anything, or anyone, of interest.

Florence was dancing with Lord Alban - a small man whose head seemed to be bigger than the rest of his body and who was much too meticulous for my taste - in the center of the room and, judging from the speed of her movements, it was impossible to imagine her in the state that she had been in a matter of days ago. I had been unable to find any convincing explanation as to what could have made her have such a severe reaction and poison had been ruled out by the physicians - and anyone who had a basic understanding of toxicology.

It was a mystery - but not one that I was planning on forgetting. It had been to spontaneous and erratic to have simply have happened by chance. Something had caused it and I was going to find out what. And punish those responsible.

That meant keeping an eye on every little thing that happened within court and, in particular, I was keeping a careful watch over both Georgiana and Markus. Georgie even more so, considering what had happened to her in her chamber.

Karinna, it seemed, had somehow convinced her to join the dance and she had coincidentally - or
not, Karinna was too intelligent to have not counted the number of participants and positioned Georgie accordingly - been partnered with the King. I wasn't the only person who had noticed this and I had already begun to pick up on a scattering of rumours regarding her intentions with him.

The vast majority of the rumours were unflattering, naturally, and I was doing my best to subdue the gossip-mongers before the hearsay could really begin to spread.

Markus, on the other hand, had been significantly less interesting to watch and had, so far, spent his time with a glass of something in his hand, talking to a group of young lords that I knew he enjoyed the company of. His companions of choice didn't seem to be particularly reformist nor puritanical, which left me with little to criticize them for for the moment.

What I could criticize him for, however, was the way he was blatantly avoiding Georgie's gaze or even her sphere of proximity. They had had an argument, no doubt, which presumably involved myself and the way that Markus had never been able to connect with me the way Georgie had. Or that was the way he perceived it, anyway.

I followed Markus' movements across the hall as he changed direction for the first time that evening, stepping into the line for the dessert table. I was weaving my way through the crowds in an instant; it was the perfect opportunity to have a few words with him because he wouldn't be able to run away without his actions being perceived as rude.

Not that he or Georgie cared particularly for public decorum. They always tended to follow their hearts rather than their minds and throw polite society to the wind. It was easy to see Helena in the pair of them.

"Are you enjoying the ball?" I slid into the queue beside Markus, resting my hands on my stomach and straightening out the red satin at the same time. Markus didn't flinch nor turn to look at me but I knew my presence was a surprise from the way he clenched his fists.

"Very much. Or I was - " He definitely was not being subtle about the part I played in his and Georgie's argument. He was going to have to work on his ability to conceal his feelings.

"You shouldn't be fighting with Georgie just because you don't particularly like me." I said softly, lowering my voice a little so only Markus would be able to hear.

"It's not because of that."

"I'm not stupid. I know that it is and you're not being fair."

"You know what I can't get my head around?" Markus finally turned to look at me, his jaw tense and eyes burning with some internal anger. "Just why Georgie thinks that we suddenly have to be allies with you. You weren't around when we were growing up and you're barely around now. We don't owe you anything - "

"Because, as much as you try to deny it, I do care about you."

"Good to know." Markus murmured, rolling his eyes. His stubbornness could rival Helena's sometimes.

"You'll do well to remember it, seeing what a fool you've been making of yourself lately."

"You're in no position to judge my behavior." Judging was the very least of what I was doing right now but I had grown used to the sly remarks regarding my position as a courtesan or 'brothel madam', which was one of the more polite nicknames I had been given. And giving backhanded
comments were a part of Markus' repertoire, yet I had never heard them directed towards me or heard his apparent lack of respect for people within my profession. I knew this wasn't him, it was something he was using to get at me and was no way proof of his own beliefs, only the beliefs of others. That hurt too.

"You're being immature."

"You have no right to talk to me like that. You left us - " Markus hissed, his fits clenching and I swallowed down the wave of guilt. The frustration was clear in his eyes but so was the pain, the sadness. He looked as though he wanted to cry; if you peeled away the strong, confident soldier you could see that he was the same lonely, hurt boy who had lost his parents far too early and took it much harder than Georgie ever had on account of his two extra years.

He was right. I had left them. Not deliberately, never intentionally but I had left. It had been months before Helena had died, months before her illness had become clear and the true severity of her condition known.

And by the time I had returned to live in Wedgemore - more than two years later when the first signs of Stefan's illness were beginning to appear - the pain, contempt and distrust had already burrowed into his mind. I wasn't sure whether he would ever trust me again but I'd be damned if I didn't try.

"I know, and I'll be forever sorry for that, Markus. But I was struggling with my own grief, too. It was your mother, my sister - "

"You didn't look like you were struggling." His words are harsh and bitter, dripping with disdain and something like envy.

Of course I hadn't looked like it. I had spent every day pushing the anger and misery down into my stomach, to the back of my mind, where it wouldn't threaten to spill out, to consume me whole.

"My sister died, Markus, and then my sons and my husband. That's not something that's easy to deal with - "

"Neither is losing your mother." His voice choked on the last word, tears brimming in his eyes that he furiously blinked back. He was going to walk away in a moment, fueled with even more hatred for me because I'd caused him to lose face in front of his peers, his friends. I stepped forwards in the line, trying to grasp for the correct words. Our relationship was clinging by a thread and any word I said could snap it forever.

I just wanted them back. I wanted them both back, before anything had ever happened to hurt them.

"I know." I said softly, wanting to reach my hand out to grasp Markus' shoulder but knowing he would instantly reject me. "All I'm saying is to not take your frustration with me out on Georgie. It's not fair and she has enough to deal with."

"I still don't understand why she insisted on going to the King to have you released from jail - "

Because you spent the day playing around with a group of glorified children. I couldn't say that to him, he really would storm away then.

"Because you spent the day playing training games with the soldiers, from what I heard."

"I play my part." He said stiffly, pushing his hands into his pockets and giving me a slow look. His eyes looked so much like Helena's it was painful. "And you can play yours."
I watched him walk away, the words I wanted to say building up in the back of my throat. I slipped out of the queue as well, heading back towards the fringes of the ball where conservations could take place undetected.

That went well.

If Markus had to hate me for the rest of my life then I would happily accept that if it meant I could remain keeping an eye on the pair of them from the sidelines. That way, I would know they were safe and I would know that, in the tiniest of fashions, I was making it up to Helena and Stefan - even if it was five years too late.

I reached for another glass of wine - Florina again, she was intent on talking to me about something but was doubt building up her courage - and turned my eyes towards the rest of the hall, scanning between the unfamiliar faces of the Lakosians and those who I knew all too well.

Sternwood was talking with a group of generals, a goblet of something in his hand and a strained smile on his face. He was another figure that I needed to keen an eye on; he had been acting greatly out of character lately and no one seemed to be able to find out just what was causing him to.

And I hated not knowing something, especially when it concerned a prominent member of the court such as Sternwood. Knowledge was power; I couldn't possibly consider all possible outcomes when I didn't have all the information.
Chapter 29

Lady Georgiana Howard

The ball ended a couple of hours later but, rather than returning immediately to my chamber, I decided to take a walk for a while in order to clear my head. I didn't want to fall into bed with my head filled with nothing but wine because that was a sure way for me to wake up in the morning with a migraine. Alcohol seemed to be one of my triggers - something that would immediately worsen any migraine I had - but then sometimes I would wake up with my head spinning regardless of whether I'd be drinking or doing strenuous exercise or not.

Tonight, however, I had drunk rather a lot. As in, a lot. I blamed Karinna’s late arrival and Markus for behaving like such a child.

He had barely looked at me the entire night and his feelings were perfectly clear; he had fallen out with me because I had helped to have Lucille released from prison when she had been placed there wrongly. Of course, I had behaved like a savage, hadn't I?

It was madness. His pettiness was childish. He could continue to sulk until he realised just how small-minded he was being. We couldn't afford there to be feuds between the pair of us; there were enough outside forces who would wish for a rift to be built between us. We couldn't build it for them.

Aside from Markus' self-inflicted vendetta and my loneliness for a good three quarters of an hour, the ball had been enjoyable. Enjoyable seemed too tame a word for what I'd felt within that moment, what I'd felt for the entirety of those five minutes before an advisor had tugged him away from me and I wandered back over to where I'd been previously stood as though I was in some sort of daze. Those moments when we had first starting dancing, when he'd first clasped my waist, had made me feel as though I were a giddy infant again.

I would forever remember every single detail about those first few moments, the gleam of the lights, the initial look of surprise that had then faded into something else. That look in his eyes, even if it was the way that he looked at everybody, had filled me with an internal warmth; the look that said he was genuinely interested in whom he was talking to and their lives and didn't see himself above them despite the constant pomp and ceremony and fanfare that followed his every move.

I passed around the corner of the corridor, tightening my arms around myself as the candles flickered on the walls shadowing the corridor in a gloomy light. I was glad the lower level of the castle was mostly deserted; I didn't want to have to deal with the inquisitive looks of passers-by and I enjoyed the feeling of being alone sometimes. It helped me to clear my head and gather my thoughts; the chill that blew through the gaps in the stone was just something that I had to deal with.

I turned the corner again, knowing that if I kept turning right I would eventually find myself at the foot of the main staircase which would take me up to my own chamber when I was tired of walking around in circles. I narrowed my eyes in the dim light, scanning over the shadows that clung to the floors. There was someone down there, a girl if the long hair spilling out onto the floor was any judge.

Some people really couldn't handle their liquor, could they?

I checked the corridors on either side of me; both were empty. Almost all of the nobles at the ball had long returned to their chambers and only a few half-drunk stragglers remained and they certainly
wouldn't be any help in transporting the girl back to her chamber.

I moved closer, rubbing at my eyes as the wine swirled around in my head and clouded my thoughts. My eyes ran over her almost-blurred figure in the shadows, my head trying to catch up with what I was seeing. Her hair looked rich and golden in the candlelight, the paleness of her gown contrasted by the stain running down her torso.

The wine was slowing down my thought process; I was seeing everything in front of me and yet my mind was lagging in understanding just exactly what I was seeing.

I crouched down a little, the alcohol in my system clouding any recognition that I might have had that I needed to get out of there, that I needed to find somebody to help and that I shouldn't be down a darkened corridor dealing with this alone.

It was her eyes that were striking, that were keeping me rooted to the spot and unable to move. They seemed pale and watery in the light but strangely wide, her skin dusky and bronzed despite the clear pallor of her complexion. In the candle light, it was difficult to see that anything was even amiss with her. She appeared to be just another servant who'd been sampling some of the liquor and hadn't watched how many glasses she had been taking.

The front of her dress was coated in a thick, dark substance. I crouched down lower, frowning at the deep stains on her neck and on her hands and the jagged cut that circled around her throat. Tied around her neck was a silver pendant that glimmered in the light and I felt a jolt of panic run through me as I locked onto the symbol that was depicted on the pendant. My hands began to sweat and I felt my vision become slightly clearer as if the sight itself was enough to sober me up a little.

It was the symbol. The one that had been found in Randell's chamber and in my own. I had committed the tiny drawing to memory and now, here it was, carved roughly into the plain silver circle the girl wore around her neck.

I pushed myself up from the floor and realised that while my mind hadn't been able to identify it, my hands had started to shake. I knew what I was seeing, beneath the curtain that the wine had pulled across my senses. The stain marring her dress and hands and throat was blood. Her throat had been cut, a knife pushed under her ribs and beneath her navel.

The sight alone made me want to turn and run, never mind the thick, metallic smell that seemed to clog the air.

This was what Sternwood had meant by messy. I looked down at the small pool of blood that had settled around her figure. He hadn't been lying. This time, at least, he had spoken the truth.

I was running before I could comprehend anything any further. My heart was pounding as I hurried down the corridors, searching for a sign of anyone. Anyone who could help me find some sort of solution to this issue. Anyone who could take this problem out of my hands and think of a logical solution.

This wasn't just a random killing. I had known that the second Karinna had told me she had found some sort of symbol in my chamber. But now someone else was dead.

And that fact terrified me.

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I was still trying to process everything was unfolding in front of me but it was as though the mixture of the wine and the fear that was now running through my body was forming some sort of mental block over my capacity to take in new information. I was observing everything and yet nothing
seemed to be sinking in.

Guards were stationed over every inch of the castle now and the gates to the city had been closed - no one was being allowed in or out, no matter their business or identity. That fact should be calming, the knowledge that the killer wouldn't be able to get away but there was also a sense of impending dread with the knowledge that the person responsible was now trapped inside the city.

I was stood slumped against the wall, my skin freezing under the thin layers of satin. Caspian, Hestia and a number of members of the guard had arrived and were talking in low voices. I knew that I could walk away at any moment. I was under no obligation to be here and yet I didn't want to leave.

I couldn't draw my eyes away from the figure of the girl, whose figure was now covered by a cloth. I had seen her talking with Lysa on a handful of occasions and the fact that I couldn't bring to mind her name gave me an even stronger incentive to remain.

Her blood had began to soak its way through the fabric of the cloth.

I was always going to remember the look that had dawned on Caspian's face when he had stormed into the corridor and caught my eye, before moving his eyes down to the girl. It had been one of fury and sadness and as though he wanted to be sick on the spot. I hadn't smiled at him; he would have known I was merely pretending.

I turned my head at the sound of thundering footsteps, frowning as Sternwood stepped into the corridor and immediately started talking with Caspian.

I felt something tighten in my gut, something sharp and angry. Of course he was here. I doubted whether he had even returned to his chamber, judging from the fine suit he was still wearing. That was not an outfit he would have thrown on in a hurry.

I watched him slowly turn and run his eyes over the figure of the girl, catching my gaze as he did so before he stepped forwards towards her. I pushed myself off the wall and clenched my fists.

"Have you been to see Karinna?" He narrowed his eyes and I saw Caspian still. Thankfully, Hestia was still conversing with a handful of guards at the end of the corridor and the proximity was too great for her to be able to hear me at the moment. "I didn't think so. There's been a murder inside the castle, another one, and Karinna is alone in her room where she's being forced to stay and has no clue about what's happening. She certainly has no chance of sleeping and the one person who is supposed to care about her most in the world - "

"You can't talk to me like that." He said sternly, pulling himself up to his full height and boring his steel-blue eyes into my own. It wasn't hard to detect the prideliful air that surrounded the majority of the generals in the army. They had spent years being told that they were the most skilled, the most adept and had won battles and fought wars to prove it. They were the epitome of masculine strength and valor; I disliked every single one of them that saw me as either an object that was in their way, an object that they needed to protect with their superior strength or an object that existed for their own amusement.

At this moment in time, Sternwood saw me as a impertinent child who couldn't keep their mouth shut. I saw him as a failing parent and I didn't care how racked by grief he was.

"Have you any idea how lonely she is?" Caspian was begrudgingly pulled away by a guard, his eyes flitting between myself and Sternwood before the guard started talking. "How lonely you have made her?"
"I care about her - "

"Then you're doing a shit job of proving it." I spat, anger and frustration fueling my thoughts. Sternwood clenched his jaw and flared his nostrils, taking a step towards me as though he wanted to intimidate me with his height. I wasn't going to fall for that. "If you payed any attention to her life then you would know that, unlike your presumptions yesterday, lords aren't lining up to talk and dance with her because they know she's the general's daughter and they're worried about what territorial father crap you might pull if they show the wrong intentions. It's also because they think that she's cold and unfeeling. I wonder why they might think that. I wonder why she might feel that way at all?"

My heart was pounding furiously in my chest, my voice venomous as I spoke. Sternwood was glowering, the anger clear in his taut frame. I had never known Sternwood to be a particularly violent man - this was one thing that I couldn't hold against him - and yet at this very moment, he looked as though he could have hit me if I dared to utter one more word that questioned his honor or his morality.

I didn't give a shit for his morality. I -

The whole corridor suddenly grew silent and I whipped around to see Estella lingering on the threshold to the corridor, dressed in an exquisite black and cream dressing gown, her hair cascading around her shoulders. Despite her almost angelic appearance, her eyes were sharp as they scanned over the corridor. I saw a flash of shock fall onto Caspian's face as I was forced to turn my attention away from Sternwood - Caspian clearly hadn't expected her to hear about what had been discovered. I doubted that anybody had.

"Your Majesty - " Hestia swept past the guards stationed at the mouth of the corridor, pushing the shock that had no doubt crossed her mind as well to the side. "This matter really does not concern you and there's no need for you to get involved in this matter." Caspian, finally out of his daze, stepped forwards as well and began talking to Estella in a low voice.

If the Lakosians heard about this, which they were sure to now, tensions between them and the Narnians were sure to escalate even further than they already had. I watched Estella's reaction with bated breath, her dark eyes glimmering in the light. I felt her gaze on me; did she disapprove of my presence in the way that Hestia did?

I found it to be awfully odd that she had suddenly appeared in this fashion; it seemed to be her specialist skill in appearing wherever something was unfolding. And yet there was nothing in her stature, in her expression, that reflected the gruesome crime that had been committed in front of her. There was no trace of sadness or grief; she appeared to be irritated more than anything, that Hestia was daring to stand in front of her and bar her path.

I frowned at the flicker of movement between Estella and the two guards that were stood at her shoulders, their cheekbones seeming astonishingly angular in the shadowed light. They shared a sharp look and instantly slipped past Hestia and Caspian, moving in synchronization as though powered by clockwork. There was a look of pure malice on Estella's face and it only took one glance, one note as to what sight she was focusing her eyes upon, to know her intentions, her presumptions, her thought process.

Her guards were marching directly for me. Apparently, she now wanted to arrest me. Marvelous.

I was far too drunk to have to deal with this shit. There was no way I was letting either of those guards put their hands on me.
"I didn't think you would be that stupid." I said nonchalantly, straightening my posture as the guards approached. Sternwood had stormed over to Hestia, undoubtedly complaining about my lack of virtue, as Caspian continued to contend with Estella - she remained perfectly calm and serene while he looked as though the frustration was threatening to burst out from him at any moment.

So at least it wasn't only myself who found this entire situation to be ludicrous. It seemed that Estella wanted to take justice into her own hands and apparently thought that I had had something to do with the girl's death, hence her attempts to now reprimand me personally.

I cocked my head to the side as the guards drew closer, their mechanical strides silent on the concrete floor. I had done nothing wrong - my head was clear enough to be aware of that fact, even if everything else was making little sense. Why was Estella here? How had she heard? Did she really have to enact her power in this way?

"I would not do that if I were you - " Caspian's voice was harsh and biting as he stormed forwards, the power in his strides almost frightening as the guards turned to look at him. His eyes were stern, all sense of unease or frustration gone and replaced with a strength and focus that I recognized from whenever he had to make a speech. "Your Majesty, you have no jurisdiction over my citizens, no matter your assumptions." There was a layer of tiredness in his voice as he spoke; how many times had he had to repeat this same phrase in the last few days?

Had Estella already tried this tactic with him? Was she the reason that Lucille had been dragged off behind bars?

If she was, or even part of the reason, then she certainly wasn't the gracious, welcoming leader that some rumours made her out to be. There was something lurking under her flawless appearance, something with bite and a callous nature to match. I was already beginning to wonder just how many of the rumours had even one scrap of truth about them because, as far as I knew, it was not a kind person who could look down at a dead body with so little empathy.

Estella did not seem to be one who would allow herself to be sidelined or ignored; I could clearly see this from the attempt that she had just made to physically restrain me. I was acutely aware of how close Caspian was to me, the heat from his body almost radiating into my skin, the scent of him filling my insides, a scent that I had now memorized.

I was also aware of just how close Estella's guards were to me, their eyes vacant and unfamiliar as they flexed their hands, their stares running over my body as though evaluating prey, assessing my murderous capabilities and violent intent. Their gazes made me restless and not in the way that I usually felt when men glared at me.

My stomach was twisting with anxieties, a tumult of apprehension and fear and the slowly disappearing feeling of adrenaline. There were too many eyes upon me in this moment, my skin felt too hot and my head too heavy to continue standing for much longer with the small amount of dignity that I was being able to muster.

I couldn't even look towards where both Estella and Sternwood were lingering on the outskirts of the corridor. My eyes were beginning to burn, either with shame or tears, and tiredness was dragging on my muscles so tightly that while I might have wanted to throw myself at the pair of them and shake them by the shoulders until their teeth rattled, I knew that I was a whisper away from collapsing onto the floor.

I slipped past Caspian and immediately headed for the nearest corridor; my previous idea of talking a long walk to clear my head had lost its appeal and the only place I wanted to be was tucked up inside my bed, where I didn't have to think about the coldness on Estella's face, the superiority on Hestia's
and the painfully lifeless form of the girl.

I couldn't even remember her name. That made me hate myself even more.

"Georgiana!" Someone was calling out my name and I slowed my pace for a moment to see that Hestia was hastily marching after me with her black curls hanging loose around her father rather than the usual style of being tightly pinned back, her natural hair and ballgown showing how she had been in the process of dressing for bed when she had heard the news.

I bit my lip and folded my arms across my stomach in a vice-like grip, if only to feel a sensation in my body that wasn't numbness.

Hestia usually addressed me as Lady Howard, because she was more interested in my family name than my first. Caspian, on the other hand, always addressed me as Lady Georgiana.

"Yes?" My voice sounded tight and strained, as though I had been crying heavily. That wasn't far off from what I would have been doing if Hestia hadn't called my name.

"Are you alright?" Her voice was unusually gentle as she continued walking down the corridor at a much steadier pace, gesturing for me to follow. "Did those guards hurt you?"

"I'm fine." I said stiffly, "You don't need to concern yourself with me."

"You just found a dead body. I have every right to be concerned about you. It's perfectly reasonable to be feeling on-edge."

I couldn't understand why Hestia was troubling herself by talking to me. She had certainly never cared to do so in the past. But perhaps Hestia could be a useful beacon of information, considering the helpful mood that she seemed to be currently in. There was no telling how long it would last.

"Why did Estella wish to arrest me? Or at least question me?" Neither of us mentioned the fact that I had called her by her first name and completely ignored her title. That could probably be considered a treasonable offence in itself.

"You were the first person on the scene which, in some people's eyes, makes you the most plausible suspect." And yet no one else instantly tried to grab me. Only her. Or rather, her men.

"His Majesty put his foot down rather firmly, as did I." Hestia said slowly and I found it difficult to imagine Hestia bargaining for someone else who didn't directly affect her own endeavors. And yet, the side that was currently talking with me was one that I had barely known existed. That made me sound utterly heartless, that I had never considered Hestia to have one caring bone in her body, but that was the truth. "You made some good points in your appeal the other day."

It seemed that I wasn't the only one who had drank a little more than they should have. Hestia surely must be drunk if she was complimenting me - or, complimenting me as much as she could without outright saying so.

"I can have some guards stationed outside your chamber if you like, it that would make you feel safer. You might be able to sleep a little easier."

"I'll be okay." I found myself saying, despite the shakiness that had instilled itself in my gut. "I'm already locking my door at night. I'm sure I can fight off any mercenaries that Estella or Sternwood opt to send." Months ago, the suggestion of this possibly happening would have sounded laughably ridiculous. Maybe it did and I was letting the wine take too much control and Hestia was wondering
just who she was speaking to.

She didn't seem to react negatively, however, as we continued down the next corridor before staring to climb the staircase. Was the Duchess of Irvington now escorting me to my chamber?

"I don't doubt it. You're exceedingly strong willed and I've heard rather an adept fighter when she situation calls for it." Was this another compliment? Or merely an observation of a flaw? She had probably heard about my intervention in the fight Markus had found himself to be in the center of recently.

"My parents allowed us to train with the army when we children." I explained. "In case we ever came under siege."

"A very sensible idea."

We continued in silence until we reached the door of my chamber, the castle seeming utterly silent. There was no inkling that anything untoward had happened mere floors below.

"I hope you have a good night."

"Why did you do this?" I asked immediately, before she had the chance to leave or I had the chance to convince myself out of speaking. I had never witnessed anything quite like this from Hestia before and never towards myself.

She held my gaze for a moment, clasping her hands in front of her.

"My son reminded me that sometimes people need a little kindness rather than government intervention or policy to help them." I had always felt sympathetic towards Julien, not just because he constantly had to live in the shadow of his parents but also because his only remaining parent didn't give a shit about him.

Perhaps, however, I had been wrong in that respect. If Hestia valued her son's words enough to drastically change her behavior to this extent, even for a moment, then there must be an element of respect and love in their relationship that they kept concealed from the eyes of the court.

I may also have been wrong about Hestia, if I considered the warmth that she was currently showing me, and Estella, if I considered the severe lack of warmth she had been emanating.

I hated being wrong. But I hated not knowing the truth a whole lot more.
Chapter 30

Lady Karinna Sternwood

I tossed my long plait over my shoulder, the strands tied much more intricately and delicately than what I would ever be able to manage on my own. My hair was lengthy, almost to the point of being unmanageable, but ever since I had had my hair cut as a ten year old, found it to be much too short and taken to wearing hats for the next three months, I dreaded cutting it.

It also gave me one of the last recognisable ties that I had between myself and my mother. She had been renowned for her beautiful golden hair.

I had leisurely dressed that morning, the tiredness from the ball still weighing heavy on my bones. As I had been dressing, I had noticed that my rose seemed to have bloomed a little brighter, though that could have been purely to do with the fact that I had moved it onto my vanity where it drink in more sunlight.

It was just ironic, wasn't it? That obviously, after only one dance with Lord Cavendish my whole life had become brighter and I had become an entirely different person. It was nonsense.

That wasn't to say that I hadn't enjoyed my dance with him because I had, but fate or whatever it was we were supposed to believe in would have to try a little harder. I did like him; I liked his intelligence and his obvious good-nature but he was going to have to understand that the way to win my favour was not to constantly be close to me or to find ways to be. I valued my solitary time, also, and if he couldn't understand that then I was going to have to make him understand it.

I clipped my earrings to my ears, the plain, simple pearls that I tended to wear every day, and felt myself smile at the memory of yesterday evening. Not only had I been able to manage the briefest of dances with Lord Cavendish, my ploys to get Georgie dancing with the King had been successful for once. She had seemed a little quiet once we had regrouped but I assumed that this had been down to shock; I was never going to forget the smile that had, somewhat begrudgingly, appeared on her face. That would be a moment I could utilise when Georgie was attempting to blackmail me over something.

I cast a look towards the silver clock that rested on my vanity and reached for my blue satin gloves. Georgie was usually awake by this time and as I had awoken in a startlingly good mood, I was looking to take advantage of the bright sunshine before the temperatures became too unbearable. Perhaps we could go for a walk around the gardens, before the frost finally settled? Or, if it really was too cold, we could take a turn around the rose gardens instead because the roses always looked beautiful, regardless of the time of year on account of them being housed indoors.

Roses were among Georgie's most favourite flowers so she always enjoyed this experience. Whenever I brought up this fact, however, Georgie would bemoan that her fondness for roses was almost a flaw because roses were seen as such a typically feminine fancy. But roses were beautiful, so of course it was typical to like them.

I reached for my soft grey cape and fastened it around my shoulders, knowing that no matter how brightly the sun was shining the air was still bound to be bitterly cold and I didn't want to have to abandon our walk on account of losing feeling in my fingers.

I paused for a moment, to check that I wasn't forgetting anything important and to cast a hazy glance
over the scattering of books that littered my dining table that I had ushered Nadina away from when she had come to arrange my hair and collect my laundry, insisting that I had my own private system that I used to arrange my books. When I had returned from the ball and finished dressing for bed, I had sat and read for a while, far longer than I had intended, hence the exhaustion that lingered behind my eyes.

In the morning, with fresh, clear light streaming through the windows, the sight of the books made me want to be sick.

A thick, heavy nausea brewed in my stomach the longer that I stared at them and considered their contents, ruining the perfectly cheerful and content mood that I had woken in. My gut was twisting with an irrational sense of fear and nerves and panic. My palms began to get hot, an uncomfortable itching sensation tickling across my skin. I almost wished that, at this moment in time, I could endure one of Georgie's migraines so that I wouldn't have to think about what I head read, what I knew.

I sharply turned away, squeezing my eyes tightly before reopening them. No. I wasn't going to think about them. As long as I kept the contents of those books far away from my mind then they couldn't influence me nor hurt me.

I wasn't going to give them the power to alter my day nor my mood. I took one final deep breath and stepped out into the corridor, shutting the door behind me and locking it. I knew that Nadina had a key and if she so wished could easily enter my chamber but it was a matter of principle.

I didn't understand how people could tell themselves not to think about something and for that to be effective; if anything, I now wanted to think about those books all the more.

What if someone found out? I had smuggled the books from the library under my cloak so there was no direct paper trail leading to my name but that did not mean that it couldn't be done. What if it was one of the Lakosians? Or a guard? Then they would be entitled to tell father...

I squared my shoulders and lifted my chin, thankful that the corridor was deserted. I needed to get a grip, as Georgie would say. I had had a plan of what I wanted to do this morning and I was going to execute that plan, books be damned.

I started off in the direction of Georgie's chamber, passing a number of somber looking servants and nobles that didn't halt to speak with me. I was quite surprised at the level of activity at so early in the morning, even if I knew the servants rose almost at dawn. The increased number of guests staying at the castle must be pulling them in every direction.

I turned down the corridor leading to Georgie's chamber and instantly caught sight of a familiar figure moving up ahead with her back towards me. At the sound of my footsteps, Lysa turned around and I instantly focused on the tired, almost grey look of her face and the weariness that seemed to have consumed her small frame. Mrs. Boweson really must be running the servants ragged. I had the mind to go and speak to her and insist on her coming up with an alternative solution because Lysa definitely looked as though she should be in bed, rather than lugging a basket of linen.

"Isn't it just horrible?" Lysa moaned as I approached and I felt my eyes suddenly widen. What? What could she mean? What was horrible?

"What are you talking about?" Lysa frowned at my blank expression and a look of horror passed over her face that made my skin crawl.

"You don't know?"
"Don't know about what? What's happened?" I could feel my heart beginning to pound, the blood rushing through my ears. Something had happened that I was unaware of, something with the power to sap all the usual effervescence from Lysa.

"Another body was found last night. I knew her, Sophia, she worked with me sometimes. She was lovely and - "

The killer had struck again. Another body. Another life. My stomach felt hollow.

"Did they find any symbols on her?" I asked and Lysa nodded.

"Someone carved it into her pendant." It was the same killer then. The same bastard who had started this whole thing.

"Where did they find her?" I asked somewhat hesitantly, wondering whether Lysa was going to be open about talking about the death of someone who had been her friend.

"In one of the corridors leading off from the Great Hall. It was after the ball so it was mostly deserted - " Less chance of being discovered then. Did that mean the killer was one of the nobles, someone who had been at the ball? But then, all of the servants had known that the ball was taking place as well as the Lakosians, so that couldn't rule anybody out from suspicion.

"Who found her?" Lysa paused for a moment, her narrowed eyes lingering on my face. What? Who had found her?

"Georgie." She breathed, her shoulders sagging and I felt a wave of dread rise up in my stomach. Georgie, who was already feeling pressured and on-edge, had been the one to discover the fresh corpse of a dead girl. The universe was practically mocking her, wasn't it?

We had reached the door leading to Georgie's chamber and Lysa hurriedly knocked, fumbling for the key that she seemed to have dropped into the swathes of laundry and had lost among the sheets. There was only silence behind the door, no sound of footsteps or murmur of her voice.

"Did you see her last night?" I inquired and Lysa shook her head.

"No." She knocked again, cursing under her breath as she continued to dig through the laundry for her key. There was no way of predicting just how someone would react after discovering a corpse and considering how traumatized she had been waking up to find a unicorn, the longer the door remained locked and Georgie remained silent the more rapidly my internal panic grew.

"Karinna." My head whipped up as someone spoke my name and I swallowed my immediate retort. No. I did not wish nor desire to speak with him, to occupy my time with him, when Georgie needed more support more. No. "Can we talk?"

"I've got this." Lysa said, her eyes flickering between myself and my father as she fumbled with the key inside the lock. "I'll check on her. You can go." I didn't want to go; I wanted to stay with Georgie. She was someone who had never made me question her actions because she had always told me what she was doing, what her motives were.

"Okay."

I moved towards my father, clutching my hands to my stomach as we slowly began to move down the corridor. If he was still feeling the after affects of the ball he wasn't showing it; he seemed to be as alert and rigidly upright as ever.
It was safe to say the ride that we had planned was probably not going to take place. He hadn't mentioned it since we had arranged the date but judging from the rather stern expression on his face and the panic that I knew this incident would have, it probably wasn't an exceptional idea for the captain of the guard to disappear for a couple of hours.

"I take it you've heard about what has happened."

"Yes, and that Georgie found the body. Did you see her last night?" I was going to go to anybody who might have information about how she was, how she had been.

The change in his expression was almost undetectable and the sigh almost minute but I still picked up on the change and this instantly piqued my curiosity and my worry.

"So Georgie definitely talked to you, then." I pressed as we halted at the end of the corridor and my father surveyed the servants and nobles that passed. "How was she?" I insisted firmly, my voice forceful.

"She seemed shaken up, which is understandable. Tired - " He paused for a moment, "Pissed off."

"And why would she be pissed off?" I kept my eyes pinned to his face, my gaze unforgiving. I wanted to know what had happened last night while I had been tucked up inside my chamber reading and squirming in my seat.

"Queen Estella attempted to have her arrested."

"What?"

"Georgiana was the first person on the scene so, in her Majesty's mind, was the most culpable suspect which is a reasonable assumption to make."

"Yet an incorrect one." I thought I saw a flicker of a smile across his face but I couldn't be certain. "You sighed so I presume she talked to you." He nodded.

"We exchanged words. Or rather, she shouted at me for a while." I felt my face begin to colour and I adverted my gaze. I loved Georgie as though she were a sister but I had never agreed with her attempt to force me to confront conflict head-on.

"I'm sorry." My eyes shot back to his face and I instantly frowned at the deep look of guilt and shame that were plastered across his typically calm face. He sounded almost breathless as he spoke, as though he was trying not to let everything spill out from him, as opposed to the strong, commanding tone that I'd grown familiar to. "I'm so sorry, darling."

He continued to repeat these same words over and over again like a litany to the point were his words began to be indistinguishable. My mind was filled with confusion and hope and my own inner guilt and too many emotions for my usually logical-brain to fathom.

All I could do was speak: speak the truth and the words that I had forced myself to keep quiet.

"You say that you're sorry and yet you acted like I didn't exist." I sounded as though I was a breath away from bursting into tears, deep, guttural tears that I hadn't felt since my mother's funeral.

"I know. I know. I'm so sorry darling." He looked as though he was going to cry, his pale blue eyes turning watery. I had never seen him cry before, not even at the funeral. Just what had Georgie said to him? "I'm going to be better, I promise. I'll make more time for you. Your mother would be so disappointed in me and I'm going to make it right, I promise."
I was stunned into silence. All my life my father had been a man of few words, a man of imposing stature and warm embraces and wisdom and carrying me whenever my feet would get too tired. Never had I see him spill so much emotion out in front of me, reduce himself from the proud solider to a weeping, sensitive reflection of a man.

"Tomorrow is your mother's anniversary." He said softly and I nodded, as though I could ever forget that date and not wake up feeling as though my entire body was weighed down with lead. "Perhaps we could go down to the grave together?"

Going to my mother's grave was always a private, personal moment that I always cherished and endured by myself. I had never visited it with another person and I had always feared to do so, in case my impassioned response was too much for my company to handle.

And yet father seemed so vulnerable and broken at this moment. Georgie's words were ringing in my ears about him having taken my mother's death harder than I had and I couldn't find the malice within myself to push him away like that.

"Can I think about it?" He nodded, the largest smile that I had seen in the last three years grace his face.

"Of course." I smiled a little, watching his eyes crinkle and feeling as though I was looking back on the man my father had been when I had been a child, before we had known so much loss and sadness. "And how are you feeling? About the body that's been found?"

"A little shocked that it was Georgie who found her but - "

"The whole city is on lockdown, we're as safe as we can be." I watched him walk away, his long, sweeping strides quickly carrying him out of my sight. The whole city was on lockdown. We wouldn't have been able to go for my ride regardless. What if he had wanted to go on the ride with me but hadn't physically been able to because of the restrictions?

What if this really was the start of something? And I had to thank Georgie for it, for having a pissed shouting match with my father?
"Who is it?" I grabbed at the swathes of fabric that I had laid out over the table and pulled them into my lap, draping them over my knee so, if I was pushed to, I could pass off the material as a new table cloth or winter throw. If it were Lysa, I'd have to create an interested benefactor who had gifted it to me but there wasn't a shortage of handsome men at court who I wouldn't mind having an interest in me. That interest only dwindled as soon as they opened their mouths.

"Karinna." I let out a sigh and carefully draped the fabric back over the table, careful not to drop my needle or tangle the thread.

"I thought you were Lysa." I explained as Karinna stepped into the room, closing the door behind her and taking a seat opposite me at my dining table. "She keeps coming to check on me and I have to hide everything." I had been working with every spare moment I could grab over the last couple of days and, finally, the dress was coming together and I knew that as long as I kept working at the pace I had been, I should narrowly finish the dress by Monday evening which was when the servants ball was taking place.

I looked up as Karinna reached for the water jug, noticing the slight frown in her expression and the way that her eyes lingered on my face. "I don't even feel that drunk, before you start panicking." I insisted, trying to change her chain of thought. "I can barely feel my migraine."

This wasn't wholly true - there was a dull spike of pain behind my left eye and when I'd first awoken I'd been wracked with waves of nausea whenever I moved too quickly, the remnants of which still lingered, and I knew that Karinna would be able to detect this. She was irritatingly perceptive and able to pick up on the smallest of my movements.

I wasn't sure whether she had heard about the incident last night. I would prefer it if I didn't have to sit through an interrogation and relive the whole experience again. I had spent the entire night doing just that.

"You sure about that?" Karinna asked, bringing her glass of water to her lips and I sighed, turning my attention back to my sewing. I knew that my wish had been a long shot; the way that gossip travelled through the castle made it impossible for anything to remain confidential for long.

I had been trying my best not to think about what had happened and push it to the back of my mind, with little success. As if that plan had ever been possible, despite the convincing I had given myself that it was.

"I know that nothing I can say is really going to help or change anything. You know that I'm always here if you need to talk." Karinna said slowly, a sympathetic smile on her face. "So...lets talk about something else. My father came to speak to me."

In that moment, I could have leaped across the table and hugged her. It was though she could read my mind.

But, her father? I had been so consumed with pushing the experience to the rafters of my mind that I had temporarily forgotten that my conversation with Sternwood had also happened, if it could be considered a conversation.
"And?" I had never seen him look so angry as he had last night. His words weren't going to particularly complimentary of me, were they?

"He said that you talked to him?" I halted my stitching for a moment and met her gaze, rolling my eyes.
"Did he really say that?"

"Maybe not those exact words," Karinna admitted with a smirk and I scoffed. "He asked if I wanted to visit my mother's grave with him tomorrow."

"You don't have to say yes just because he asked you." I reminded her, feeling a flicker of pride and relief that my hot headed comments had not been entirely in vain.

"I know. I'm just thinking about it." It seemed that, perhaps, I had finally managed to get through to Sternwood about how it wasn't merely him being affected by his grief and how, instead of skirting around the issue which was they approach the pair of them had been adopting for what must have been months, it was better to actually address the problems bluntly.

Except, maybe, not quite as bluntly as I had been. I blamed the wine.

"And what exactly happened with the Queen?" I wanted to burst out laughing as I watched Karinna's bemused expression.

"She tried to have me arrested." I said with a roll of my eyes. Looking back, that part of the night had seemed almost laughable.

"I can't believe she actually tried." Karinna mused. "For what?" I shrugged.

"Caspian stopped her before she could actually do anything."
"Of course he did." Karinna smirked at me, raising a brow and I became intently focused on the sewing in my hands.

"He would have done that with anybody whom was at risk of being falsely imprisoned." I said sternly, ignoring the knowing look that Karinna was wearing. I knew that he would have because that was just who he was. My identity had made no difference in the matter.

"Fine." Karinna sighed in defeat, her eyes still sparkling with intent as she crossed her legs. "Well, I think we need to revaluate some things."

"What?" I frowned at her.

"Like, how we now abhor Queen Estella."

"I at least hate the way she looked at...Sophia." I said slowly, forcing myself to speak her the name for the first time. "Looked at her with exactly no feel. No, that's a lie. She looked at her as though she was annoyingly fly that she was being forced to deal with rather than a human being. I'm beginning to think that she might not be the benevolent leader that some people seem to think that she is."

I would never forget that look of utter hollowness and vacancy in her eyes. A part of my brain was murmuring that maybe this was just her way of coping with the shock of the incident, to close of her emotions, but I knew that I would never be able to ignore the dead look that I had seen in her eyes.

"And Hestia, I mean - "

"What happened with Hestia?" Karinna asked and I paused for a moment. I wasn't sure that I even
knew what had happened with Hestia. I still considered her to be something of an anomaly - unpredictable and uncontrollable.

"She walked me back to my chamber. She was really kind to me."

"That's new." Karinna said with a slight frown and I nodded. I had been searching for her ulterior motives in our exchange but had been yet to find any; it seemed that she had simply been being kind. I was unused to her acting for no gain, no reward, no benefit to her own cause.

"She said that Julien had reminded her of the importance of kindness. I think that she's trying to protect him in all of this. And create a stronger place for herself among all the tumult of recent days by re-establishing some old loyalties."

"With you."
"Maybe." I murmured. Considering Hestia to be anything other than a snake that needed to be carefully watched and monitored was a foreign feeling and I knew that I would need more evidence of her shifting focus than one conversation that I had slightly glazed over due to my half-drunk state.

"I've been doing some thinking - " Karinna started, leaning closer to me as I re-threaded my needle.

"Naturally." I added.

"And I think that whoever killed Sir Randell must have also killed Sophia."

"Agreed." I replied with a nod. "It's too much of a coincidence." I had considered the idea that perhaps the perpetrator was only using Randell's death to make it seem as though his and Sophia's deaths were connected to throw the guards off the scent but if I spent too much time wondering about this then I would think myself into a frenzy.

"But why? Randell and Sophia lived completely different lives."

"There must be a link between them and we need to find it: whether she worked for his household or they were romantically involved or they were involved in some kind of scandalous affair together. We need to figure out what the link is because that's why they were killed."

"Lysa said that she knew Sophia so I'm going to try and find her, see if she knows anything about how she might have got herself involved with him." Karinna said and I nodded. I hated the fact that Lysa had inadvertently found herself caught up in a murder case, especially when it involved one of her friends and someone that she had spent a lot of time with. She was probably still in shock. I knew that I was. "You still have work to do." Karinna gestured down to the sewing in my lap.

"Well, in my breaks I'm going to try and find Lady Swifton." I saw Karinna narrow her eyes. "Because I think that whoever poisoned her but that unicorn in my chamber." The thought of that morning was still vivid enough to intensify the nauseous feeling but I pushed it down.

"But you don't think that is who killed Sir Randell or Sophia?" I shook my head. "You told the King that they were."

"I said they were connected, not that they were the same person." I said pointedly. "It makes no sense why two people would be brutally murdered and yet when given the chance to kill Florence and myself they didn't take it. They had different motives between the murders and what happened to myself and Florence. I might go and talk to Lucille. She seemed like good friends with Florence and might have worked something out."

"How are we going to find out about Sir Randell? He's a solider so - "
"He's a soldier so who do we have at our disposal?" The answer was obvious. The only problem would be finding a way to make him talk to me.

"What's happened between you and Markus?" Karinna asked, clearly picking up on my train of thought. I had hardly seen him over the last forty-eight hours and whenever I did, which was a maximum of once a day, he would never speak to me.

"He's still irritated with me because I helped to get Lucille released from prison."

"But why?"

"Because he's a petty little shit and he needs to grow up." I half-spat, my hand tightening around the needle as the metal began to dig into my palm.

He didn't understand the relationship that I had with Lucille and I wondered if he ever would. I deeply wanted to explain to him why I could never ignore her and why, despite the bitterness that I often felt and treated her with, I was always going to have a connection and relationship with her that Markus would never understand.

The lines that tied us were too complex, too long, too frayed for me to go down that path. I had promised myself that I would never go back to that time and I'd be damned if I allowed myself to be dragged backwards.

- The plot thickens! Who do you think the main suspects are? And what's going on with Georgie's past?
Chapter 32

Lord Julien Cavendish, Marquis of Irvington

Whenever Caspian was struck with a new proposal or scheme, it was often myself who would be sent out to test the waters, so to speak, or to carry out whatever leg work his new idea entailed, while he busied himself with ambassadors and paperwork and whatever else needed his official presence and stroke of his pen.

This time was no different, hence why I had to traipse around the castle in the freezing cold searching for Lady Karinna, Lady Georgiana and Lysa Carker, as opposed to settling down in the comfortable warmth of the council chambers.

If I didn't find them soon, I was going to temporarily abandon my mission in favour of a glass of mulled wine and a sit down. I could always tell Caspian that Lady Georgiana and Lady Karinna had been taking a bath and Lysa simply couldn't spare any time away from her duties.

I was sure that Caspian would appreciate that mental image of the former.

Caspian had decided that the way to solve the mess he had found himself in was to pool everyone's knowledge and then, that way, hopefully come to a more substantial conclusion. Ever since Lady Karinna had looked into the pagan symbol found in Lady Georgiana's chamber, it had been clear that both she, Lady Georgiana and Lysa had been conducting some investigations of their own and Caspian was now curious to know whether their searching had yielded any results.

And because he happened to rather like the bright, vivacious and exceedingly pretty Lady Georgiana.

Of course, this wasn't the official reason for my search and, if asked, Caspian would deny this thinking until he was blue in the face but it had been clear in the way that he had danced with her at the ball that he held her in a certain regard in his mind. It had somehow managed to get out that it had been Lady Georgiana who had discovered Sophia Clangrove's body last night and so it wouldn't seem too out of the ordinary for the King to wish to inquire with her about what she had found, meaning that there was no risk of Caspian's 'true' motives for the meeting being revealed.

It was nearing lunchtime and despite having been grooming the castle for what seemed like almost an hour, I had as of yet been able to locate either Lady Karinna, Lady Georgiana or Lysa. The castle seemed to be slightly emptier than usual, although this was probably down to nobles sleeping off the hangovers that they forced upon themselves last night and many of the castle inhabitants sitting down to eat in their chambers.

I had seen an awful lot of Lakosian nobles floating around, particularly on the ground level of the castle where the parlor, which seemed to have become her Majesty's favourite place to preside over her court, had been overflowing with ladies practically begging to sit at her table and play a card game with her as well as an inordinate amount of gentlemen fawning over them all.

Looking at them, you would have never been able to tell that someone had been murdered last night and yet this seemed to be her Majesty's most frequently used and refined skill: hiding her true feelings and somehow managing to control the atmosphere within a room. Instead of being somber and grave, the Lakosians seemed cheerful and lively. I would bet on her ability to hold court in any room, regardless of the resources available to her. All she needed was her piercing eyes and
captivating voice and she had the ability to make anyone do almost anything.

I turned a corner, determined that once I reached one thousand steps without spying them I would simply turn around and return to my search after I had dealt with the grumbling in my stomach. And, as always, Lady Karinna was able to overthrow my carefully prepared plan.

At the opposite end of the corridor was both Lady Karinna and Lysa, talking among themselves and, as of yet, unaware of my presence. I straightened out the collar of my deep grey tunic and felt my breathing quicken as I walked towards them. Why did Caspian have to make me do this? Why did I let him continuously bully me into things like this?

"Lady Karinna. Miss Carker." I inclined my head towards them, watching them drop into brief curtsies before meeting my eye. Karinna was looking at me with a strange expression on her face, one that seemed colder than any of the gusts of wind that had blown against me. Had I done something to offend her? I racked my brains, thinking back to last night and every step of the dance that we had taken together. I had never been so cautious about not stepping on someone's feet before.

I knew that many nobles had various preconceived ideas about what they thought Lady Karinna was like - cold and frigid and unfeeling - but I considered this to be something of a front, a façade. In the limited conversations that we had had together, once the initial discomfort had faded, I had found her to be intelligent and charmingly witty in her own way, as well as being beautiful which was the one aspect gossip seemed to focus on. Then again, it was by no means uncommon for gossip to simply focus on a woman's appearance, was it?

"The King would like to speak with the pair of you." I said, watching Karinna's warm hazel eyes instantly sharpen.

"And why would his Majesty request that, my lord?" Karinna asked, my title at the end clearly added to incent some kind of reaction from me. I repressed my want to sigh; Caspian's idea was hardly the easiest to explain in a matter of words, particularly as he wanted the matter to remain as private as possible.

"He wants to talk with you both about Miss Clangrove's death." I said as gently as I could, watching Lysa's posture stiffen slightly. "He was hoping that we could...share the information that we know and hopefully come to some sort of conclusion about what might have happened. His Majesty would like to speak to Lady Georgiana as well - "

"She's not well." Karinna immediately stated. "She has a migraine. She told me that she was fine but I think she would benefit from taking a rest." I nodded. Migraine or no, I would recommend anyone who had stumbled across the body of a murder victim deserved some time to sleep.

"Right. But are the pair of you feeling well enough?" I almost winced at my boldness as Karinna and Lysa shared a look between them. I was not one to shy away from what needed to be said but I did draw the line at pushing friends of murder victims to recount their past relationship. Caspian had told me that he trusted me to handle the situation with 'grace and charm'. I had wanted to throw something at him.

"You will have to be the one to explain to cook if Lysa is late for her shift because she was attending to his Majesty's whims." Karinna said sharply, raising an eyebrow in my direction, and I nodded, feeling a wave of relief wash over me.

"Thank you." Perhaps now we could begin to answer some of the questions that had been thrown in our direction over the last couple of days.

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I drained my glass of water - it was far too early for brandy, and even mulled wine it seemed, and carefully placed my glass down on the tray. Caspian was particularly fussy about getting stains on his furniture, even though I had told him on many occasions that the only person who would notice any such marks was him. Of course, this wasn't the only office that he had because he had many and so, with the amount of switching chambers that went on, no one would be in the room long enough to spot any water stains but...anyway, he always shouted at me whenever I placed my glass on the table top.

I looked at over at him, shifting my feet; he was flicking through a heavy looking tome, one that he had been staring at for what must have been an hour by now as he had still been scanning the pages when I had returned from locating Lady Karinna and Lysa. They had promised to make their way over as soon as Lysa had dropped her washing off at the laundry.

I hadn't commented on the look which I could only describe as disappointment and concern when I had explained to him that Lady Georgiana was in bed with a migraine, even though I had greatly wanted to.

Caspian hurriedly closed his book and moved it to the side as a crisp knock on the door broke the silence. I straightened up, clasping and re-clasping my hands as Caspian cleared his voice. "Come in!" He pushed himself to his feet, running a hand through his hair and swallowed hard. It felt as though there was an awful lot riding on this one conversation; he wasn't the only person feeling the pressure.

Karinna and Lysa slipped into the room, Karinna lightly closing the door behind her before they both curtsied.

"You don't need to do that." Caspian said immediately. "This is supposed to be informal but...Thank you for coming." As if being asked to see the King in his office would ever be informal, no matter how hard he tried. I think that Caspian sometimes forgot just how intimidating some people found him to be; or perhaps he just chose to ignore this because I knew how he hated people treating him as though he was some kind of god. "I know that Lady Georgiana was attempting to look into what had been going on and - "

"You were wondering if we had found anything?" Karinna interrupted, her pale grey dress shifting as she moved to fold her arms. Caspian nodded and I found myself wanting to smile; it was unfathomable to me how some people could claim her to be cold and impassive. "How about you tell us what you know first, sire." The diplomatic upbringing that had been forced onto her, as had been onto many of the young nobles, was evident to see. Old habits were hard to break.

"I have been looking into Miss Clangrove and - " I cleared my throat and threw him a look. Caspian looked as though he wanted to roll his eyes but thought it would be wildly inappropriate. "Or we have. We know that she has worked in the kitchens for the last four years - "

"Four and a half." Lysa suddenly interrupted and Caspian instantly scribbled this down, biting his lip. I wasn't sure just how open Lysa was going to be on the matter but anything that she said could be considered useful.

"I understand that you were acquainted with her?" Lysa nodded.

"I saw her every day."

"We have been unable to trace any of her surviving family members - "

"Her parents died many years ago." Lysa said, her voice clear despite the pained look in her eyes.
"That will be why, sire."

"Right." She was isolated and alone, with no familial ties or members to help her. It was a life that, sadly, many people were forced to live.

"We have been trying to establish just how she may have been connected to Sir Randell." Karinna said. "Because Georgie - "

"Georgie?" I repeated.

"Yes. Our affectionate nickname for Lady Georgiana." Georgie. It was personal, intimate, something only used by those close to her. It was yet another tool which I could use to tease Caspian with. "She believes that whoever killed Sir Randell also killed Sophia."

"We were thinking the same thing." Caspian said with nod, meeting my eye. "Did Sophia ever mention Randell?" Caspian asked, looking over at Lysa. She paused for a moment before nodding.

"Yes. She didn't particularly like him."

"Why not?" I asked. Many people hadn't particularly liked him, despite pretending to, but I was curious to know what he could have done to insult a servant that, presumably, he had had fairly limited contact with. Lysa sighed and looked down at her hands, flexing her fingers. She didn't seem upset by my question, which was what I had expected, but instead seemed almost angry.

"She was often the person who would bring him his evening meal and he would ask certain things of her. Things that she didn't want to do."

"Were these requests regular?" Caspian asked softly.

"Fairly."

"The requests were sexual?" Lysa nodded. I felt as though my throat was constricting as I tried to breathe. I had always known that Sir Randell thought himself to be far above others but I had never truly realised just how deluded his grandeur was; how he thought he was in a position to demand such acts.

"She never made a fuss about it, though." Lysa continued. "He acted that way towards a few of the servants so we thought - "

"Did he ever make these requests towards you?" Caspian asked again and I saw Lysa bite her lip.

"Yes. A couple of times."

"I'll look into it. And keep your name out of my inquiries, if that would put you at ease?" Lysa sucked in a breath before nodding, forcing something of a smile onto her as Caspian scribbled down some more notes. If Karinna was surprised at Lysa's proclamation, she hid it extraordinarily well. I looked over at Caspian and wanted to smile; even when he was trapped in the midst of a double murder investigation, attempted poisoning and whatever legal term could be attached to the crime committed against Georgiana, Caspian would still never stop attempting to make sure all of his citizens were safe and happy.

Even if that meant protecting them from other citizens. It seemed to be something of a running theme that several knights and nobles thought that their standing or their gender allowed them ownership or control over any woman that they so desired. If the problem persisted, I wasn't sure whether a covert investigation and trial would be suitable enough punishment. The offending nobles had to know that
their behavior would not be tolerated.

"We also came to the conclusion that whoever is responsible for poisoning Lady Florence is the person responsible for putting that butchered unicorn in Georgie's chamber. And that person is not the same one that is responsible for the double murder."

"What about the symbol that was found in Georgiana's chamber?" I asked instantly. Caspian and I had been wondering whether all the crimes could have been committed by the same person but it seemed our idea was about to be disproven.

"I did a little more research," Karinna continued, "and the symbol is rarely used in a religious context anymore. It's more commonly used in modern practices as a deride and critique towards young women who are deemed dissolute. So, they either selected the symbol because it was simply the first one that they came across or because they found it amusing by associating it to Georgie because she is young and unmarried."

"So rather than being a religious sect - " I started.

"It seems more probable that it was used because of its connotations of maidenhood and seeming sexually attractive - " Karinna continued, her tone almost scholarly as she spoke about her findings.

"Thus, in conclusion, the perpetrator simply wanted to show off his prowess because he wants to sleep with Lady Georgiana."

"Probably..." Caspian said in a clipped tone, slowly jotting something down. Was that just disapproval? I really was reading too deeply into his feelings now, wasn't I?

"This all suggests that the perpetrator of the attack was a man." Karinna said. "At least one man, perhaps more."

"Why do you say that?" I inquired.

"Because butchering a unicorn and tying it to a bedpost without waking the person inside the room is no easy task." She said smoothly, "and I would say impossible for one person to achieve on their own. It would take a group of people."

I felt Caspian's gaze on me and turned to face him. "If it truly is more than one perpetrator then we have been going about this business all wrong. We need to start searching for more than one man."

It went unspoken that the chances of catching a group of people at work was far less likely than catching a single perpetrator; the investigation could spook the man into turning himself in but a group of individuals would find strength and solidarity in the growing sense of panic and adrenaline.

Everything had just got a whole lot harder.
Chapter 33

Lord Markus Howard

I wiped my shirt sleeve across my forehead, grimacing at the moisture that now clung to the white fabric. My legs were almost shaking as I forced one foot in front of the other, steadily plodding away from the training fields and back towards the castle. The perspiration drowning my skin was something I had grown used to now, after the years of taking part in the grueling training exercises that the trainers and generals concocted. I felt as though I spent half my life on the grassy fields, running back and forth and lugging maces or pickaxes or whatever was the weapon of choice for that day alongside me.

Despite the undue amount of time that I spent roaming those fields, I was only ever partly concentrating on my fitness and technique: most of my energy was put into introducing myself to other nobles and soldiers, in the hope that I might be able to form something resembling an alliance between the pair of us. I would start by subtly inquiring whether they had heard of Wedgemore - many people hadn't - before introducing them to the fact that Wedgemore had enormous fish reserves and wondering whether they needed extra coal or if they had any armed forces that they would be willing to share.

And then I had to prove my, and Wedgemore's, worth by being able to fight and shoot impeccably and shake the image that I was going to vomit all over their boots.

After that was the agony of waiting for an answer or any kind of response at all. The answer, in all fairness, was often no because few people wished to support a practically unheard of city in the North whose future was uncertain and unstable. That was usually their response to a city whose heirs were an as-of-yet unmarried and somewhat frail woman and a man who had nil interest in courting the women that were pushed in front of him.

At the moment, however, there was something of a beacon on the horizon in the form of a lord who seemed to be on the brink of saying yes to us and I was paranoid about ruining our chances, meaning I was spending every spare second that I had out on the fields to ensure that proceeds went as smoothly as they possibly could.

We could not afford to lose this one.

I passed through the grand stone arches that led back inside the castle, yearning for the warm bath that would greet me once I reached my chamber. A few lords passed by me, their clothes also drenched in sweat, but a figure at the end of the corridor made me pause and reach for the water skin hanging from my belt.

It was Georgie, her hair pulled back at the nape of her neck and her gown of choice a muted shade of magenta. She must have realised that I would be out on the training fields and had been waiting for me to return, knowing the route that I always took to return to the castle.

"Be sure to rest that ankle - " I spun around, half-stunned, to see Lord Torian pass me, flash a smile in my direction and gesture down to my ankle that I had lightly sprained when I been slightly too enthusiastic in tackling Sir Collier to the ground. The pain was almost unnoticeable but it was kind of him to remember. I nodded, watching him disappear up one of the smaller, more winding staircases, as Georgie made her way towards me.

Torian happened to be one of the lords that I didn't particularly mind and, in fact, I could go as far to
say that I considered him a friend. He was amusing and didn't make jokes at my expense like some
other people did. As well as that, he happened to be staggeringly handsome with an air of the King
about him, in his long hair and dark eyes.

"He's new." She said briskly, gesturing towards the staircase that Torian had disappeared up. I
nodded.

"And he's not a total idiot."

"Right." Georgie and I had had limited contact in the last couple of days on account of my busy
schedule and attempting to keep our latest alliance from falling through. Was that the reason that she
seemed to be so stilted? "I've barely seen you these last two days so I figured we should talk."

"I'm sorry." I admitted, watching the way Georgie's lips pursed.

"Sorry for acting like a child?"

"What? What are you talking about?" Had I missed something in my morning of training? I had risen
at dawn, glad that I had refused that fourth glass of wine last night, and made my way over the
training fields before most of the castle had risen. Had something happened that I was unaware of?

"Ever since Lucille was released from prison you've been ignoring me."

"No, I've not."

"Yes, you have!" Georgie shot back, her voice stern and unwavering. That was why Georgie had
been so distant with me. "And I thought you -"

"So maybe I was pissed off at you for a bit but I'm not petty enough to ignore you for two days
because of that." I said. "And so maybe I can't understand your loyalty to her and what you think
you owe her because you owe her nothing but -"

"We owe it to her to look after her because she is family we don't have much family left." Georgie
said firmly and I sighed. Ever since being a teenager, I had never understood the exceptionally close
and trusting relationship that Georgie had had with Lucille. I had always put this down to losing our
mother at such a pivotal moment in her life so, naturally, she would gravitate towards the only
apparent mother figure that was remaining. At least, that was what I had always put it down to. That
was the only explanation I could find for the exceptionally close relationship that they had.

Georgie was right, however. The remaining members of the Howard line could be counted on both
hands and the vast majority of those members neither I nor Georgie had set eyes upon in years.
Sometimes the feeling of loneliness and isolation that seemed to follow our lives was overwhelming.

"Perhaps we didn't have to feel quite so alone, sometimes." Georgie said finally, her voice quiet. Her
eyes were no longer sharp and bitter; she had realised that while I could be a petty piece of shit when
I wanted, this time my distance hadn't been intentional. "Maybe we could bear to put down our pride
for once in a while, because we both have more than enough of it, and admit when we're wrong."

"That sounds like quite an ask." I joked and saw Georgie smirk. Our pride was most certainly a
family trait and one that would be hard to knock but Georgie was my sister and my best friend when
she wasn't driving me crazy with her reckless schemes and peculiar temper. She had my undying
loyalty. "But I might be able to try."

"Good." We walked in silence for a few moments as I took the soft look in her eyes to be her form of
apology. I knew that it was hard for her to show weakness as she perceived it; that was something
father had drilled into her after mother had died. I had missed most of these lessons on account of the amount of time I had spent with our Uncle on the training fields. He had been a fiend with a blade.

"So if my theory wasn't correct, just why have you not been speaking to me?"

"I've been busy." I saw Georgie rolled her eyes and she gave me a hard glare.

"Compared to what I thought the explanation was, that sounds pathetic."

"I am being perfectly truthful, I will have you know." I defended. "I have been frightfully busy."

"Is that just busy with Lord Torian? Or have you actually been working?" Georgie clearly couldn't be particularly irritated with me if she was telling jokes, even if her glare spoke otherwise.

"He is just a friend." I confirmed, ignoring Georgie's raised brow and her smirk. He was just a friend - a friend who just so happened to be astonishingly handsome and not an irritating sod. "And what have you been doing this morning?"

"Sewing Lysa's yule gift." She said, with something of a tired sigh. I narrowed my eyes and she sighed again. "I'm making her a dress and I need to have it ready for Monday. I figured I should probably allow myself a short reprieve."

"You've been doing it all morning?" She nodded. "Nearly all morning, anyway. I had a slight migraine when I woke so I was sleeping that off -"

"Now I feel guilty for not coming to see you." I murmured, shooting her a concerned look which she instantly rebutted by nudging me with her shoulder. I really did need to get my head out my own arse - not everything was about work and training and persuading lords to ally with us. I needed to look after Georgie too.

"It's not your job to babysit me." She said firmly.

"I think you'll find it is, princess." I said with a smirk, sending her instantly rolling her eyes and increasing her speed in an attempt to brush away from me. She'd have to try harder than that in order to escape my teasing - it was one of the highlights of my day.

"Have you heard about Sophia Clangrove? The servant who was killed?" Georgie asked, her tone suddenly turning serious as we turned a corner and I had to instantly duck to avoid a servant carrying a platter filled with chocolate coated fruit.

"Yes, I heard some of the lords talking about it. It's awful, truly." This was the second death in a number of days; the killer didn't seem to be stopping any time soon and it worried me. One death could be considered a fluke, if anything, but any more revealed a distinctive pattern and agenda.

"And did you hear about who found her body?" I shook my head. Either the lords hadn't picked up on the piece of news either or I had just been too late to the conversation to hear it. I saw her expression still as she swallowed heavily and I instantly felt myself frown.

"What?" She remained silent for another moment and that was when the realization hit me. "Oh, fuck no - I ducked around an approaching lady, whose eyes instantly narrowed as she picked up on my language but I didn't care. I dove towards Georgie whose hurried steps were succeeding in taking her away from me.

"I'm fine." She said shortly as I caught up with her, reaching for her forearm. "Honestly, I'm fine."
"No, you're not." I said, lightly clasping her arm. "The impact of seeing a dead person never leaves you and if it does then there is something wrong with you." I watched Georgie purse her lips and switch her eyes towards me, some of the defiance leaving her face. I moved closer towards her, wrapping my right arm around her back and pulling her into my side where she could rest her head against me.

A wave of guilt was shooting through me. My first thought when I had woken was wondering if I could somehow find a spot of breakfast from the kitchens before making my way over to the training fields. I had had no idea that it had been Georgie who had discovered the body last night, that it had been Georgie who had had to somehow force herself to sleep all the while seeing nothing but the face of the dead girl in her dreams.

"I'm the worst person." I murmured into her hair as I gently rested my chin on top of her head, something that she would have hit me for usually because she said that it always made her feel smaller. "I'm the worst brother."

"No you're not." She insisted, turning her eyes up towards me with something of a smirk on her face. That was something else about Georgie: she never allowed others to dwell on her misery for long, even thought it would consume her own mind for months to come. "You'll be able to make it up to me."

"I'll buy you enough chocolate to build a castle from tomorrow." I promised. "The sort that you like, with the vanilla and honey and crushed biscuit."

It was the annual Winter Fete tomorrow despite the terrible crimes that had occurred - or at least I was yet to hear of any news to suggest otherwise - which consisted on inviting a myriad of tradespeople into the castle grounds to sell their wares, as well as there being games and food and drink provided by the kitchens. Whenever the weather allowed, there was also ice-skating on the vast pond that was located in the castle grounds.

"And then there's all that ice skating - " I continued and Georgie stared at me with a puzzled look.

"You can't ice skate. You've never been able to ice skate."

"Then I can try. Again." I said with a smile, the smirk on her face reward enough for the pain that I would have to endure tomorrow as I staggered around the pond, clumsily trailing after Georgie as she gracefully skated along. It would be worth it, however.

Perhaps that would vanquish the deep feeling of guilt that had settled itself into my gut. Georgie had found a murdered corpse last night - my own sister - and I had done nothing. The sight would no doubt haunt her for months, if not years from this moment on.

And I had done nothing.

"Have you seen the King today?" Georgie had a knowing look on her face and I shrugged innocently. It was an innocent enough question.

"No." She said with a sigh. "Karinna and Lysa saw him earlier. They were called to his office and spoke with him and Lord Julien."

"Why did he wish to see them?"

"He wanted to ask them about the murders." The murders that were now plural. I brushed this aside; Georgie did not need anything more to corrupt her dreams. She found it difficult enough to sleep as it was.
"You are turning into a crime fighting team." I joked. "And why didn't you attend?"

"I was resting with my migraine when I really should have been sewing Lysa's dress."

"You missed an opportunity there." I said with a grin. "A private meeting with the King in his chambers." I waggled my eyebrows with my meaning explicit and Georgie wrenched away from my grip, nudge my in the ribs with her elbow.

"You can shut up." She said pointedly. "And I always have tomorrow - with all that mulled wine around who knows what will happen?"
Chapter 34

Lysa Carker

The next morning, I was forced out of bed before the sun had even risen because of Mila's mewling cries and her eagerness for milk. I had to wake early regardless, in order to be at my work station inside the castle at the break of dawn, but I had hoped for at least a little more sleep.

A handful of hours later and I had forgotten what it felt like to be groggy and sleep-deprived, yearning for my bed and a glass of warm milk. Everyone was working with maximum focus in an attempt to get everything prepared for the Winter Fete which was due to begin in a matter of hours. Every single worktop was being utilized in the process of making some delicate, delectable treat that looked as though it had been produced by a faerie.

And yet, among the bubbling of the huge copper pots and the grinding of pestle and mortars, there was a heavy air that had descended onto the excitement and thrill of what we were accomplishing. Mourning. Because there was one apron that had remained on the hook, one station that had been bare that Matron had decided to use to store the half-decorated march-pane berries.

Not only were we missing a pair of hands, meaning our work was all the slower, but we were missing a whole person. The knowledge of what had occurred just more than twenty four hours ago hung heavy in the air.

I had been torn since stepping foot inside the kitchens on what train of thought I should follow: whenever something tragic occurred, I was determined to push on and continue with my work but was that synonymous with forgetting Sophia? Shouldn't we take more time to remember her and reflect on what had happened?

But then, when did the time come to stop reflecting and to continue with regular life again? I doubted whether I would be able to fully resume regular life any time soon, seeing as a strict curfew had been imposed on the city and harsh restrictions had been implemented on who was allowed to enter and leave through the city gates. I couldn't resume my normal life when there were far too many guards walking around and standing at checkpoints for my liking.

Amongst the sickening scent of boiling sugar and fresh herbs and the continuous motions of rolling and grinding and stirring and pressing, my head was beginning to ache.

Mother always said that it was good to keep busy and that was my only motivator in pushing on through the mountain of tasks we needed to achieve that morning. And so that I didn't become utterly consumed by anxiety over the servants ball that was occurring tomorrow evening. I was trying not to think about it; it wasn't exactly working.

After hours of toiling, our creations had finally begun to take shape and was among the first to volunteer to start transporting the completed products out into the grounds to be placed on the awaiting tables. I would take anything to escape from the heady aroma of boiling sugar.

The master of ceremonies had certainly chosen a good day for the fete; the weather was cold and crisp, with the perfect smattering of frost over the ground. I deeply inhaled the freshness as I stepped out of the kitchens, clutching my platter of sugared plums tightly in my hands as I hurried along the passageway, glad that I had decided to put on an extra woolen layer under my dress this morning to protect me from the cold. I would have to be outside almost all day and I did not want any of my extremities to turn blue, especially if I had to handle sharp cake knives.
I carefully made my way down the steps and out onto the grounds, the frost crunching under my feet as I moved. The lake had frozen over during the night meaning there was bound to be ice-skating and games for the children later. Perhaps we would be able to have a go before the nobles descended and starting throwing us condescending looks, as though it was only their pond and we were far too primitive to be able use it?

Not that I was particularly good at ice-skating. More often than not, I would end my lap of the lake being dragged precariously around by Tristan or one of the other kitchen maids or I gave up on making a good show of it and slumped down onto the bank instead, watching the children stumbling along. Regardless, it wasn't being good that counted, it was the taking part and the gaining of new experiences.

My mother would repeat that mantra whenever one of my brothers would complain about having to do something and I had heard her say it so many times that I was sure it was now permanently embedded into my skull.

I rounded the corner and couldn't refrain from instantly bursting into a smile as I surveyed what seemed like the hundreds of colourful tents and stalls that were sprawling across the grounds, vibrant flags and bunting flapping in the wind on the poles that were straining against the wind to keep the tents upright. I didn't much care about the condescending looks the snobbish nobles were sure to give us, not when everything was as exciting and magical as it was. Or at least as it seemed.

I headed for the tents that had been erected on the left of the grounds nearest to the castle, ducking down under the tent flap before carefully laying my tray of sugared plums down on the shimmering piece of purple velvet. The tables weren't even half filled yet and already I could feel my eyes widening in amazement.

It didn't matter that I knew the talented cooks and confectioners who had produced the delights or that I had watched them be carefully prepared and crafted; I was still just as amazed at what could be produced from sugar and treacle and flour.

I felt myself smirk as I ducked back out of the tent, wrapping my green cloak tighter around myself as another group of kitchen maids passed into the tent, each clutching platters and plates filled with deserts. Georgie was going to be stood in front of that table all day long and I really could not blame her.

As well as the desert tables, further along the castle wall were tables laden with warm bread and fresh jams, butters, cheeses, chutneys and meats that, whilst not being as visually exciting as the magnificent cakes and sweets that were being produced, were still just as delicious. There was always too much bread laid out and that meant the kitchen staff were always sent home carrying baskets filled with fresh loaves and buns.

I expected that was the real reason the kitchens had been abuzz with excitement earlier: everyone knew just how the day was going to end and the benefits they were bound to reap.

"I don't know what you think you're doing but it's certainly not being useful!" I almost winced as I turned the corner to see Matron standing in the open door leading to the kitchens, her arms tightly folded and her eyes furiously glaring down at a small group of maids who hurried past me so quickly that I was sure they were bound to fall over. I kept my eyes low and I squeezed past her, immediately heading towards the far end of the kitchen to collect another plate to take out to the tent.

We all might hate Matron sometimes, especially during the summer when we were all dripping in sweat and near to fainting and she still wouldn't allow any of us to open a window in case of flies, but that didn't mean we couldn't see and appreciate just how efficient she was at organising people
and ensuring what needed to be done was. I often wondered whether the army could make use of her expertise, considering the amount of faffing around and not much else that the generals seemed to do.

And while she was strict and austere and completely authoritarian, she also cared about every one of us and I knew that, beneath her steely, unyielding façade, she was mourning Sophia in her own way too. Her death had affected so many people in different ways, ways that the high ranking nobles whose laws we were commanded to follow would never understand.

Maybe that meant we were all selfish as we had changed our behavior very little when Sir Randell's death had been announced.

But, then again, Sir Randell had been something of a monumental prick so maybe that was more to do with the reason why. He definitely wasn't the only noble who went around propositioning servants and assuming that he owned their bodily autonomy but perhaps something positive might come out of his death - his actions, and those of others, may finally be brought to light and considered seriously rather than simply dismissed.

And if it took the death of an idiot to make that happen, then I supposed I could live with that.

Had Sophia's death transformed me into a harsher, more judgmental person? I wasn't sure. All I knew at the moment was that among my excitement over the Winter Fete was an awful lot of unchanneled anger and deep frustration at what had happened, and what had been allowed to happen.

"I'm tempted to throw her into the meat locker in a minute just to shut her up." I looked up as another maid, Elenora, appeared at my side, taking hold of a huge dish filled with elderflower jelly. "I don't care if there are a three-dozen more platters to be brought out and vats of wine to heat; it's freezing and I'm walking as fast as I physically can."

"She needs to calm down." I agreed as I reached for another platter and followed Elenora out of the kitchens, keeping my eyes pinned to the floor and quickening my pace.

"We're moving as fast as we can!" Elenora continued, her dark cheeks flushed with frustration as the wind whipped her dark hair over her face. "And I've not seen her carry any platters yet - "

I nodded in response, tightening my grip on the platter of strawberry cream cakes. Elenora was outspoken to the point of being rude sometimes and while I wasn't particularly close with her, her bluntness was a break from the suffocating solemn stares and mournful looks that inundated the kitchen.

Every step I took, every face I met, was a reminder of what had happened to Sophia.

"Your mistress is Lady Georgiana, right?" I frowned before nodding. I had stopped calling Georgie my mistress a long time ago, ever since she had told me that she needed a friend and ally rather than an employee and I could just as easily call her Georgiana or Georgie, which was what her brother called her. The familiarity and intimacy of being able to call her Georgiana may have taken me some time to adapt to but now the prospect of considering her my mistress seemed utterly foreign and uncomfortable.

"Yes."

"She's the one who discovered Sophia's body, isn't she?" Even Elenora, completely unabashed and unashamed, couldn't let me completely remove myself from what had happened. She had to make me remember. I nodded again.
The knowledge that it had been Georgie who had found the body had somehow managed to seep into every pore of the castle. She was now receiving a torrent of added attention which she didn't really need directed at her at the moment. Most worrying of all was that I had even heard some people theorizing that she had been the one to murder Sophia because she was mentally unstable on account of her headaches.

I had never heard something so full of rubbish in my entire life. But what was more worrying was the tiny majority of people who seemed to be seriously considering this idea.

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A couple of hours later and the Winter Fete had officially began, with what seemed like hundreds of people sprawling across the grounds and taking part in the various games, activities and spectacles that had been put on. I did feel rather proud at how magical and mystical the scene looked, even if I had done little else than carry platters and mix enough bowls of cake batter to last me a lifetime. I enjoyed the atmosphere of the thing more than anything - the excited chatter and laughter and good spirits that were flowing as freely as the drink.

It was almost enough to distract me from the thought of Sophia. Almost.

I had been positioned behind one of the huge vats of mulled wine with a ladle in my hand and a table of wine glasses behind me. The job might be tedious but at least I was able to keep myself relatively warm; Tristan, it seemed, had drawn the short straw and had been tasked with helping people who were skating on the pond to fasten their skates and to be on hand in case there were any incidents. I felt sure he was going to get frostbite standing out in the open wearing little more than a cloak but he had insisted that he would fine.

He always insisted that he would be fine, even when he clearly wasn't.

I had served Georgie and Markus a glass of mulled wine so I knew that whatever feud had developed within their relationship during the last couple of days had finally been solved. I had also been keeping an eye out for Karinna but seeing as it was the anniversary of her mother's death, I hadn't expected her to really be in attendance. At least not until later on.

I kept my eyes trained on Georgie and Markus and had to hide my giggle as I watched Georgie attempt to drag Markus out onto the pond with her to little avail. He instead went over to talk to a group of nobles, leaving Georgie to skate across the pond alone. I knew she wouldn't be alone for long, however, because she had the uncanny ability of being able to strike up a conversation with almost anyone if she so desired and was able to form a connect with anyone on any subject.

I had often wished that I had that easy ability to converse with people, but then I was much more comfortable just talking to those people that I was familiar with and knew well. And with the ever changing inhabitants of court and the seemingly new addition of new faces every day, this number was small. Too small, some might say.
Chapter 35

Lady Georgiana Howard

Markus had abandoned me on the ice, which I had entirely predicted, in favour of some of his good-looking lord friends. He was an utter bore; he wouldn't even try to skate, not since a series of unfortunate - and apparently humiliating - falls on his part which had left him defiant in his refusal to so much put on a pair of skates.

If he wanted to be miserable, then that was his prerogative. I could skate circles around some of his lord friends - literal circles, as I was lazily demonstrating as I moved across the pond - but that was only because I had had a lot of practice on the lake in Wedgemore as a child and had taken many a tumble on that lake, almost to the extent that my mother had threatened to have the ice broken so that I couldn't skate anymore.

I started skating slowly as first, mainly because of the nobles around me were hobbling along, helplessly clinging onto each other and laughing at their predicament, at the pace of a tired snail.

I wouldn't have felt so dejected at Markus' refusal if I had someone else to talk with. But from her absence, I had gathered that Karinna had decided to accept her father's offer of visiting her mother's grave together and I could hardly begrudge her that. Not after the months it had taken for them to reach this point.

Or was it years? There wasn't exactly a specific starting point -

My head shot up as a piercing, child-like scream filled the air and I felt everyone around me freeze. I looked up to see the small figure of a girl stood in the center of the lake, her wide, frightened eyes pinned to the ground. It wasn't unusual for less confident skaters to skate out too far into the center of the lake and then realise that they didn't have the skill or the confidence to make their back to the outside.

But what was more unusual was the thin, sharp crack in the ice that was striking through the center. And what made it worse was the fact that this girl was clever; she knew what danger she had just skated into, judging from the slow tears that were rolling down her face. She was small and slight, with wavy golden hair. I didn't recognise her meaning that she was most probably a Lakosian.

I glanced around the pond - I was one of the closest people to her and, as I watched the girl blink frightenedly down at the crack, I knew what I had to.

I tentatively stepped forwards, listening out for the tell-tale sign of cracking ice. Behind me I could hear frantic voices and I looked over my shoulder to see Caspian attempting to push forwards towards the girl, but two of his more muscly advisors holding him back. Because while the King may not have any qualms about him risking his life, it was obvious that others did.

I stepped forward again, leaving the rest of the spectators behind me and tightly clutching my fists as I swallowed and caught the girl's eye. I was moving as quickly as I dared, the crack beneath her feet glaring back at me as something like a warning siren began ringing in the back of my head - I needed to hurry up, I needed to go faster, I needed to go.

"What's your name?" I asked her, forcing a smile onto my face as I moved closer. I blocked out the chatter I could behind me, someone that sounded like Caspian, and then Markus, and was that Orel?
"Elira." She murmured and my smile widened.

"My name's Georgie. I'm going to come and get you, okay?" She nodded tentatively, shifting nervously as she stared down at the crack. She wasn't stupid. She knew what could happen any second.

If it really was Markus' voice that I thought that I had heard behind me, he was going to have a fit if he wasn't already. Well he could hardly go and help her, could he? He wouldn't even put on the skates.

"I need you to reach your hands out, okay, and you're going to hold onto mine." She nodded, slowly uncurling her fists and reaching out to grab mine. I tightly clutched onto her, her small palms like ice cubes in my own as I stepped forward so that I was close enough to touch her.

The crack had grown what looked like half a foot in the space of a moment. It had appeared out of nowhere; perhaps my mother's worries about me on the ice hadn't been entirely unfounded.

"It's okay, I've got you." I insisted as I tightened my grip around her small shoulders, feeling the almost indistinguishable quake in her frame as I did so, and steadily clutched her against my body as I headed for the bank. Elira was crying fully now, no doubt the shock and the adrenaline having a more forceful affect than her fear ever would. "You're safe. You're safe, now."

My chest was feeling so tight that, in a moment, she wouldn't be the only person crying. The terror and panic had built up inside of me, like a spring ready to explode.

But Elira was fine. I had her safely in my arms. Everything was fine.

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Elira had been reunited with a half-sobbing, blonde couple who I assumed were her parents and she had been led away back towards the castle and the calming smell of cinnamon and march-pane.

She was fine and yet I still felt as I thought I was a breath away from fainting to the floor.

I had seen Caspian hurry after her as soon as she had been reunited with her parents, a handful of advisors trailing after him. I now wanted -

"You just had to be the heroic one and save all the children, didn't you?" Markus chortled, only half-joking as his face turned serious. I rolled my eyes at him and bit my lip.

"I'm fine, really. Nothing happened. Now I'm just wondering where the hell that crack came from." Markus opened his mouth to speak but was cut off as a figure suddenly called out my name and he started smirking.

"Oh look. It's dreamy coming through - " I didn't have time to respond to him before the figure was upon us. My heart began to increase again and, this time, it wasn't due to the fact that the responsibility of a young girl rested on my shoulders.

"Lady Georgiana! I owe you a considerable thank you. You saved her life." I blinked up into Caspian's face in surprise, repressing the urge to dig Markus in the ribs and burst into tears at the same time. I still felt as though my nerves were a breath away from fraying completely.

"I wasn't just going to leave her there." I said firmly, looking up to meet his eye and immediately feeling myself to start to blush.

"Well I - I'm just glad you're both unharmed." He said with a smile
"I'm fine." I confirmed. "But I'll be eternally glad our governess taught us to skate." Out of the corner of my eye, I immediately saw Markus pull a face and look down at his boots.

"She taught you - " He said pointedly and I cocked my head to the side, a smirk on my face.

"I somehow seem to remember that you would run away whenever our lesson was scheduled. Or you would conveniently happen to be asleep."

"I don't remember that. I think you're confused, Georgie." He said with a grin and I narrowed my eyes, glaring at the smirk he was sporting.

"It's funny that, isn't it?"

"Good morning - " We all turned to see Julien appear at Caspian's shoulder, a smile on his face that I assumed was a complete façade for those around him. There would be no greater way to destroy the chances of international alliance and diplomacy than a Lakosian child half-drowning in a freezing lake, as though a double murder investigation wasn't reason enough. "Duke Rainrow wishes to speak with you."

Caspian immediately sighed and out of the corner of my eye I saw Markus raise an eyebrow. I could sympathise with his; Rainrow was not exactly one of my favourite people, nor was he one of the most interesting.

"He never stops talking." Caspian explained with a sigh. "I'm going to be stuck with him for hours and I'm hungry and want to eat something."

"Just say no?" Markus said with a shrug.

"I have to at least try and look polite all the time." He said, something that Markus was also supposed to be doing in his role of forming alliances with other nobles. But, it seemed that he would rather beat them to a pulp with a sword than have an amicable conversation. But that was just him...

"Try and bring up the Navy. Or the Dawn Treader - " I said after a moment, watching Caspian frown. "He's terrified of water. If you mention one of the noble quests that you've embarked on where you've been sailing across the endless oceans then he'll need to go and lie down."

"How exactly do you know this?" Caspian asked with a bemused smile, one that sent flutters through my stomach.

"Yes, how do you know that?" Markus asked, with a more concerned frown on his face that was slowly growing into a smirk. "Assuming that you've never used this technique to avoid conversation with him? Wait. Was he one of your gentlemen admirers?"

I tried not to grind my teeth as I glared over at him. Julien's face was neutral, as per usual, and Caspian's was one of curiosity. Why did I feel so awkward talking about my past not-even-relationships in front of him? I felt none of my apprehension when speaking about them to Markus or even Julien and yet my palms were beginning to feel clammy, despite the freezing temperatures.

"What? Fine, yes he was. But he happened to be one of the okay ones, not one of the ones who had a whole variety of ulterior motives. And that's how I found out he's deeply scared of the ocean." I said, turning the conversation back to the matter that we were supposed to be discussing.

"I shall go and try your technique and report back with my findings," Caspian said with a smile, quickly bowing before retreating in the direction of Duke Rainrow, closely followed by Julien.
I let out a sigh as I lost him in the bustling crowd. I stretched and re-clenched my fingers, adjusting my cape around my shoulders and swallowing tightly. Markus looked far too amused for my liking by our exchange. I didn't even want to know what kind of thoughts he was thinking right now. Most of them were probably far too obscene for polite society.

"On a more positive note." Markus said finally, clasping his hands behind his back in the picture of diplomatic saintliness. "My reason for being so absent recently, which I still think was a perfectly decent reason, looks to be yielding some promising results."

"What?" I narrowed my eyes, ignoring his comment about his perfectly decent reasoning. He sighed dramatically.

"I think that we have a good shot of securing extra soldiers for our artillery." I felt my eyes instantly widen and my smile began to grow.

"What? Really?"

"That's why I've been so busy," He replied with a shrug.

"Who from?"

"That's a secret." I felt my smile immediately begin to decrease as I frowned.

"Shut up."

"It's not completely confirmed yet so I don't want to get your hopes up."

"You've got my hopes up by just telling me this much!" I insisted loudly, a Lakosian lady turning around to frown in my direction but I didn't give her any time.

"It's looking good." He said simply, the adjustment of his eyes clear that he wasn't going to give me any more details. Of course, I had plenty of ways that I could use to make him tell me who his potential benefactor was but if talking loudly was frowned upon by some of the company around us, I knew that my methods would not be appreciated. And if Markus really was as close as he thought to making the deal, then I didn't want to butcher our chances.

I could cope with this tiny piece of knowledge for now. This wonderful tiny piece of news.

I leaned forwards to rest my head against his chest, letting him wrap an arm around my side and squeeze me closer. I felt him place a brief kiss on my forehead as I looked up at him and smiled. "I love you."

"I love you too, Princess." He replied with a smirk, earning himself a dig to the ribs. But it was times like this that reaffirmed what we were doing and that we weren't completely failing. Sometimes it felt that way when we would receive denial after denial after denial of possible alliances but this, no matter how small, was something.

A step towards building something that our parents would be proud of.

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An hour later, Karinna had returned from her morning with her father and she was much happier than I had initially expected her to be. Her morning had been pleasant, more than pleasant it seemed, despite the obvious sadness that clouded the whole day. I had briefly seen Sternwood and met his eye for a moment when I caught him returning his empty class to be refilled.
He had smiled slightly in my direction; perhaps I had finally knocked some sense into him.

Now that I had Karinna to talk with, Markus had clearly grown bored with his babysitting duties and so, unsurprisingly, I saw him going off to talk with some of his friends, including the dashing Lord Torian. For just a friend they were certainly doing a lot of a laughing. But he seemed of a pleasant disposition and I could hardly discourage Markus from having friends, particularly friends who didn't make snide remarks about him behind his back.

Karinna and I had taken ourselves to a slightly more subdued area of the fete where we could communicate without having to shout down the others ear in order to be heard.

Karinna had found it particularly amusing when the King, after passing us on his way towards the dessert tent, had sent something that I presumed was a wink in my direction. My advice on Duke Rainrow had apparently worked - I'd seen their conversation break up after just ten minutes which was a fraction of what I had had to endure over the months of our 'courtship.'

Nevertheless, his wink had made me feel as though I was going to faint prompting Karinna to remark that I certainly had been making a lot of communications, hadn't I?

Hilarious.

"I'm just happy that you're happy." She giggled, taking a sip of her mulled wine as I rolled my eyes. I didn't think happy was quite the emotion that I was feeling - it didn't seem a strong enough word to describe them - but I knew that what I was feeling certainly wasn't sadness. And that had to count for something.

"I'm happy that you're happy." I repeated, my sarcastic tone clear but there was also a truth behind my words. She was currently the happiest that I had seen her for a very long time because a contentness that sincere was difficult to ignore.

Now all we needed was for people to stop being murdered and life really would be great.

"What's happening over there?" Karinna asked as my eyes followed a group of very lavish Lakosian ladies whose dresses I definitely wished to copy.

"Where?" Karinna gestured over towards the lake where a large group of people seemed to be congregating and the volume of people was growing after every second. I instantly began to frown, my eyes picking up on the soldiers that were rushing towards where I presumed Caspian was, their faces tense.

Oh no. Oh fuck.

What had happened now?

Karinna and I began to surge through the crowd in our attempts to move closer to the lake, mumbling our apologizes to those that we passed. After I had rescued Elira from the lake, it had been deemed too unsafe to be used for ice skating and had since been cleared. So whatever was going on now had to be something...else.

The closer Karinna and I were to the bank, the louder the conversation around us grew. In my haste and my worry, my senses seemed to intensify as I picked up snippets of conversation from all around me.

The dread that seemed to be almost permanently settled into my stomach dropped deeper. I thought I was going to be sick; the snippets of voice that I had pieced together couldn't possibly be true, could
The consuming mass of people around me was overwhelming. I was being jostled from all signs - Karinna lost somewhere far behind me - as I forced myself to breathe, the words of those around me repeating over and over again inside my head.

There was a body in the ice. There was a body in the ice. There was a body in the ice.
Lady Karinna Sternwood

I wasn't sure just how much time had passed; the day had passed in something of a haze that I had simply drifted through. I was currently stood on one of the balconies that looked down onto the grounds, my hair whipping around my face, as I watched the soldiers that had been tasked with what must surely be the most unpleasant of activities. The King and Hestia were also present but they stood too far away for me to be able to make out their expressions. It wasn't difficult to imagine what they were, however.

As soon as the body had been discovered and the initial buzz had died down, the fete had slowly began to disband with what I supposed was some gentle manipulation from the guards in their attempts to clear the scene. The immediate area around the lake had been cordoned off and was protected by armed guard as they attempted to figure out a way to remove the body from the ice.

No one seemed to know anything about the body - anything that was truthful, anyway - but the majority of gossip seemed to speak of the body being that of a woman. Temperatures had only dropped to those capable of freezing water last night, meaning she had most probably been killed yesterday before her body had been dumped into the lake. Had the perpetrator known about the lake freezing over or had they just been lucky? But, then again, just how could someone know how the weather would change?

I tucked some of my hair behind my ears, attempting to keep my vision clear. That now raised the death toll to three, all of whom had also been Narnians which, unsurprisingly, had ricocheted tensions inside the castle. I had already heard of one minor scuffle between a group of Narnians and Lakosians and those tensions were only going to increase and develop into something more severe.

Well, it had been relatively minor. One man had apparently ended up with a broken nose but this seemed to be down to him walking into a wall rather than a savage blow.

The killer must have known that their actions would cause this discord between people. Was that the whole reason for their behavior? Did they mean to start a war? But if that really was the case, then surely they wouldn't spend so much time with their victims and bother to move their bodies to different locations after killing them. But, then again, this was the first time that a victim's body had been moved.

I still couldn't shake the notion that the symbol was important and yet I hadn't discovered any new information that would shine a light on just exactly why I was having this feeling. The symbol made the deaths seem more meaningful, more personal and more of a catalyst for hatred and tension. I didn't know whether a symbol had been found on the body in the lake - they were yet to fully remove the body from the ice so it would undoubtedly be some time before I knew.

If the killer was perceptive and could see just how frayed tensions were growing as a result, they would surely leave the symbol in a similar fashion to the first two victims. But then, at the same time, I was yet to speak to anyone who deeply believed the crimes to be a result of a religious motive. If that had been the killer's true intention, they had massively failed in that respect.

And perhaps that would be a good thing. Then, the seemingly senseless violence that was breaking out between people would have had some true conviction behind it and I was sure that, if that occurred, people would be lucky to walk away with only a broken nose.
I heard gentle footsteps approaching me from behind and I turned my head, before shifting back to face out over the grounds.

It was Julien, with his hands in his pockets and a tired, almost grey look about him. Because of course it bloody was.

"Why are you not assisting the King?" I murmured as he came to stand next to me, his eyes looking out over the grounds.

"He asked me to go and find out whether the scavenger hunt that was planned for this afternoon could still go ahead, considering the morning's events."

It had barely passed lunchtime and yet so much seemed to have happened; I had visited my mother's grave with my father - an event that I hadn't thought I would ever attend - and another dead body had been discovered. But the games - and the attempts to win Queen Estella's favour - could wait for nothing.

"I forgot that was planned for today."

"And to read the atmosphere." He continued, turning to face me with a wry smile.

"I don't think you really need to do much reading." I said dryly, watching as the King started back towards the castle from the lake, closely followed by Hestia. "It's perfectly clear what the atmosphere is."

"No, I didn't." He agreed, swallowing deeply. I clenched my hands, attempting to warm them in the fierce chill of the wind. Neither of us spoke for a moment and I became hyper-aware of his breathing, the heat that radiated from his body that I could feel from standing beside him.

"Are you following me?" I asked, more sharply than I attended. I was in no mood for fakery or miscommunication at this moment; I needed to know exactly where I stood with him because everything was beginning to become confusing. And I didn't cope well with confusing.

In fact, I didn't cope at all.

"No." He answered firmly, his eyebrows furrowing in confusion. I could feel his eyes boring into the side of my head but I didn't want to look at him. I wanted to remain objective.

"Because you seem to appear wherever I go and I'm wondering what the reason is. I don't believe in coincidences so that rules out one explanation. Do you?"

"Coincidences oppose logic." He said after a moment and I wanted to smile; of course Julien would chose the most logical answer. "But I do think that some things simply cannot be explained."

"Everything must have an explanation and a cause." I said firmly. "That is the law of physics."

"Doesn't life become dull and tedious that way? If you know the answer to everything?"

"You didn't answer my question. It would seem you are avoiding it." I said quickly, ignoring the growing smirk on Julien's face as my thoughts began to whirl. Logic and fact had always been what drove my decision-making and perceptions. I always considered my options and decided on the most rational choice. And yet the warmth that I often felt around Julien, the slight nausea in my stomach, had no apparent explanation or cause that I could identify and physics said that something could not be born of nothing.
"My arrival was not a coincidence, no." He said, something of a bashful look on his face. "I sought you out."

"Really?" I didn't know what to do with this piece of information. I knew that I should be unnerved and yet Julien didn't seem to be the malicious type whom would seek me out for some kind of ulterior motive. But why did I perceive him as being not malicious? I barely knew him. That was what made no logical sense. "And why would you do that?" I enjoyed the bashful blush that he was wearing; it made a welcome difference to nobles going out of their way to avoid conversation or communication with me.

"Because I enjoy speaking with you." He said and I stared at him, sending him an incredulous look.

"I believe that we have spoken on less than five occasions,"

"Then perhaps I wish to speak more with you." I felt myself begin to smile, despite the conflicting thoughts that were still swirling around my head.

"I guess I can't argue with that." I said, shifting my eyes to look out over the grounds again as I tried to force the tingling feeling in my stomach down.

"Did I pass the test?" He asked with a grin and I rolled my eyes.

"It wasn't a test."

"It felt like a test."

"I'm just trying to get everything in perspective. I had a chance to think about some things this morning, really think."

"That sounds like an easy start to the day." Did Julien know what day today was? He had been at court when my mother's accident had occurred but I could hardly expect him to remember precisely, not considering every other event that occurred at court that was a thousand times more memorable.

"I went to visit my mother's grave." I said quietly, gripping the edge of the balcony and relishing the cold stone beneath my gloved fingers. I saw a flicker of recognition behind Julien's eyes as his face softened. He knew. He remembered. "And I think - " My voice caught in my throat. It was something that I had been thinking for a while, something that I had been wrestling inside of me and something that I had finally reached a conclusion upon this morning whilst sat on the marble bench in front of her grave. "I think she would want me to stop pushing people away."

"I don't think you push people away." Julien said, moving so that he was stood next to me. "I think that a lot of people project ideas onto you and create ideas about you that you're secretive and aloof and are hiding some terrible secret - "

I felt my insides turn to stone as he spoke, my hands gripping the balcony even tighter as I forced myself to swallow. I felt as though my throat was closing up, the irony of his words bearing down on me. I didn't respond, keeping my eyes pinned in front of me and hoping that Julien presumed I was simply watching the soldiers hack away at the ice on the lake with hammers and clubs.

If only Julien knew.

He thought I was something else, something perfect and misunderstood and he was guilty of putting me on a pedestal just like everybody else.

But I wasn't. I was completely the opposite. And there was something lurking inside of me,
quivering with anticipation and wanting that I had to fight every second of every day to keep concealed.

And I knew that I couldn't push it down forever.

- What do you make of Karinna and Julien's relationship? What's going on with the murders? Thank you so much for all your reads!
Chapter 37

Lady Georgiana Howard

One of the extraordinary things about court that always surprised me was its ability to put an event behind them - almost as thought it had never happened - and open their eyes even wider to the next event and this was exactly what seemed to have happened in this instance. The woman's body had barely been removed from the ice - I was still clueless as to her exact identity but word had spread that the body was that of a woman - and there was already another topic of discussion, another event that was far more exciting than some ghastly murder that didn't bare thinking about.

It was awful, really. And yet no one seemed to think any differently.

It was later that day, just passing mid-afternoon, and I was currently stood with my arms firmly folded across my stomach in one of the largest parlors in the castle that was open to any member of the court and one that Estella hadn't completely taken over with her court and their elaborate card games. The room was bright and airy with high ceilings, a highly polished tile floor and an assortment of armchairs and divans that had all been pushed to the perimeters of the room in order to accommodate the vast number of guests who were currently occupying the room.

There was no better tool to forget all about a murder than a scavenger hunt.

The process of choosing one's team and then having them officially registered by the nobles who had been unfortunate enough to be assigned the task was a lengthy and arduous process, one that almost completely eclipsed the supposed fun and enjoyment of the scavenger hunt itself. I was still remarkably shocked that the hunt was even still going ahead but apparently Estella, and Caspian, were very competitive and weren't about to back down from a challenge.

I had observed many of these court entertainments over the years and knew for a fact that Caspian was almost as competitive as I was; I put it down to a lifetime of being the younger sibling and wanting to outrank Markus if every single way possible.

I had positioned myself on the far side of the room so that I had an excellent vantage point of the main doors, without being stood in the main fray of the crowd. I was pairing up with Karinna, naturally, and was waiting for her to make her appearance. I had seriously considered asking Markus to be a part of my team because, as much as I hated to admit it, he could be a rather useful team member in times of need but had quickly disregarded this decision. He would refuse my offer out of spite; it wouldn't surprise me if he had already registered his team and it consisted of simply him and Lord Torian.

Then they would be able to find a secluded, darkened room and claim that they had simply been looking for their next clue and had taken a wrong turn.

"Georgiana?" I started, tearing my eyes away from the door and looking to my right where I had heard a voice calling my name. I had been staring into space and considering my rivalry with Markus so deeply that I had zoned out for a moment and - oh, shit...

It was Caspian. He was stood with his arms loosely folded, wearing one of the vivid silk shirts that accentuated his olive skin, the warm tones of his hair and his eyes...

And he had just called me Georgiana. No Lady or Howard business. Georgiana. And while that was
indeed my name, it sounded far too intimate to be passing from his lips.

My chest was becoming tight as I forced myself to continue breathing naturally and smile in what I hoped was a pleasant manner.

"I'm sorry. I startled you, that-that was inconsiderate of me." He spoke quickly, his eyes flickering down to the polished floor. The heat of so many bodies being compressed into a single room was clearly flustering him, hence the light blush that was dusting his cheeks. I swallowed deeply, thinking of something, anything to say. "Lady Howard, that was rude of me, I - "

"It's okay." I insisted hurriedly, tripping over my words before forcing myself to slow down. "Georgiana's my name, isn't it? Lady Howard makes me sound utterly ancient."

"Of course." The room was so tightly packed that, for once, very little attention seemed to be lingering on the King. People were far more interested in nudging their way through the queues to register their teams than watching two people have a conversation, which I was positively thankful for.

But why was he talking with me? There were plenty of other people in the room who would make amicable company for him, people whose rank and history far outdid my own.

"Are you registering for the scavenger hunt?" I wanted to roll my eyes at him but, seeing as this could be perceived as being rude, I settled for a knowing look instead.

"Of course I am. I'm the most competitive person that I know. So I would recommend that you don't get in my way."

"I won't." He said with a smile and I instantly felt myself wanting to backtrack. Why had I said that? If anything, I wanted him to get in my way. "And your teammates?"

"Lady Karinna, when she decides to make an appearance." I said with a good-natured smile, casting an eye towards the doors and finding no sign of her. "She's been in her chamber these last few hours, I think, so she'll be along shortly." There was something about the way he looked at me while I spoke, utterly attentive mindful, that provoked the butterflies in my stomach. "No doubt she's observing her perfect rose - "

"Is that contempt I detect?" Caspian asked with a grin and I smirked.

"Mine has lost four petals already and yet hers has remained unaltered." I explained. "That's worse than my attempt last year and I thought that nothing could stoop to that level again."

"I hope I don't enact your wrath," Caspian said teasingly, his playful tone sounding far too intimate for a conversation with the King, "but mine is currently unaltered also. I'm not quite sure why - " He chuckled.

"You make a mockery of the ceremony also?" I knew that many members of the court saw the ceremony as nothing more than pompous faff or religious excess and I was perhaps one of the few who didn't mind participating. "I wasn't aware the King could do that."

"No, I - "

"I'm joking." I said quickly, watching his cheeks begin redden and his expression to turn panicked. "But you believe?" I nodded.
"I blame my parents. They would make us reenact the whole thing, even if its only supposed to take place with the monarchy. They made us learn about its origins and I - I mean, there must be some element of truth to it all. I don't think that death can simply be the end of everything. There must be something beyond that, something that we don't currently know about and we can't see but it's...there."

"I think that's a very thoughtful reasoning." Caspian replied, tucking his hands back behind his back as he smiled. I swallowed, feeling my stomach begin to flutter again. I had never thought that, after explaining my views on death and the afterlife, that I would feel quite so...flushed. I had had many a theological conversation with Karinna about matters such as these so my views weren't new to me and there was no reason for me to feel the way that I did.

And yet I still felt as though my whole being was warming up as a result of his presence and his body standing so close to me.

"And your team? For the scavenger hunt?" I asked, attempting to move the conversation back onto something resembling small-talk; something that was easier for me to control and would be less revealing about the current disarray of my feelings.

"Julien." He said with a shrug. "It's tradition. He'd probably fall out with me if I picked anybody else. But this year, I think Markus is also joining us -"

I blinked.

Excuse me? Markus was on the same bloody team as the King and he hadn't told me?

I immediately started scanning the crowd around me, fueled by a new sense of annoyance and pettiness that only Markus could bring out of me; our sibling rivalry went deeper than simply being a biological consequence, it was at the core of our very personalities.

He was on the same damn team as the King. He must be so pleased with himself.

And, of course, the ass that was Markus was staring me straight in the eyes and grinning as he slowly sauntered towards me.

"I'm sorry, excuse me for a moment, sire - " I said quickly, while already moving past for him and charging straight for Markus. "You turned me down for him?" I hissed, my meaning clear. He had turned me down, his own sister, for the man that made my hands start to clam up every time I laid eyes upon him? Markus' grin grew wider.

"Is that supposed to be an insult?" Caspian was hovering close behind me, no doubt a smile on his face judging from his tone but all sense of diplomatic protocol had temporarily flown from my mind. There was nothing that could vanquish the anxiety brewing in my stomach more than the proposal of a direct competition between myself and Markus.

"I am going to destroy you."

"You and who's army?" Markus replied with a confident shrug. He thought that know he had the King on his team, there was absolutely no way that he could lose. Well, I was just going to have to prove a point now.

"Myself and Karinna who have more brain power than the three of you put together." Markus rolled his eyes, the smug air radiating of him.

"Bring it on, Princess." I didn't care that Caspian, stood only a few meters behind me, had now
discovered what Markus' nickname for me was; all I knew was that I really wanted to flick Markus in his perfectly smug and contented face.

That was when I finally spotted Karinna entering the room and triumphantly turned back to Markus. "This has been fun but I really need to have a team talk with my partner." I started off towards Karinna without another word, quickly filing through the waves of people that stood between myself and Karinna. I could feel the adrenaline humming in my veins, my competitive nature more than ready to burst free.

Markus had allied himself with the King out of spite and out of competitiveness because he knew full well what my feelings were. He was about to regret that decision when Karinna and I kicked his ass.

"We have a problem."

"What?" Karinna narrowed her eyes in confusion, her pale blue gown shimmering under the lights as her hair flowed loose around her.

"We need to beat the King's team. We need to."

"Because that's going to be easy." Karinna said pointedly; it was no secret that the King was something of an academic and certainly wasn't stupid.

"He's on the same team as Julien. And Markus." Karinna inhaled a sharp breath.

"We definitely need to beat them." Karinna's competitiveness was a slightly more surprising element of her personality, given her logic-driven mind. But that logic didn't mean she didn't have the same innate desire to win that I did.

"They're the dream team." I said only-half sarcastically. I wasn't exaggerating or creating the prowess that practically dripped from their line up; they were all clever, quick-thinking, somewhat logical in Markus' case. Beating them was not going to be an easy task and yet, for the sake of our pride, it was something we were going to have to accomplish.

I would never be able to live it down otherwise.

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Whoever had started off the tradition of holding an annual scavenger hunt during the Yule period clearly had no regard for a regular sleep pattern because, as per tradition, the search began at dusk and ended at dawn and, other than adding a somewhat foreboding atmosphere to the whole thing, it mostly resulted in a lot of exhausted and sleep-deprived participants the next day who spend the next twelve hours tucked up in their beds.

I, having learned from participating in a couple of previous scavenger hunts, had managed to grasp a couple of hours of sleep after officially registering our team and now I was glad for that; it was nearing midnight, we predicted we were roughly half way through the series of clues that would take us around the castle and I could already feel my energy levels lagging. The only thing that was pushing me to place one foot in front of the other was the adrenaline running through my body.

It was as though I had been completely taken over by some foreign entity and now, the only motivation that I knew was to beat Markus, Julien and Caspian. But mostly Markus.

We had glimpsed Markus and the others a couple of times as we hurried through the castle but had never dawdled long enough to exchange anything other than a faraway glare. I wasn't going to let myself be distracted by his chortles or stupidly smug face. We needed to focus on figuring out each clue.
Though, at the moment, this was proving to be particularly challenging. We'd been stuck on the same clue for what must have been the last twenty minutes and we were beginning to get frustrated; I was seriously considering going to have a word with the master of ceremonies who organized all of these activities and telling him that he seriously needed to clam down.

"It must be on this corridor - " Karinna murmured, unfolding the scrap of parchment and rereading the clue that had been scrawled across them for the fifth time. We'd narrowed down the location of the next clue to a single corridor in the east wing of the castle - after an arduous process of rattling through every word we could think of that rhymed with east - and now, seeing as we had absolutely no clue what exact door we were supposed to find the clue behind we were taking to searching every room.

I was only too aware of how much time we were currently wasting. After every second we spent in this same corridor without finding the clue, Markus could be inching further and further ahead of us.

"I think it's locked." Karinna said, releasing the door knob and flexing her fingers. This door was located in a shady side corridor that fed off the main one and while I knew it was not the chamber of any noble or official, I couldn't discount a clue being hidden inside. I wasn't sure what the room even was, but I couldn't not look inside. "It won't move." She stepped back to let me try; I wasn't prepared to leave anything to chance and was determined to double check every single move we made. We couldn't afford to make any silly errors or forfeit any clues that would lose us points and valuable time.

I gritted my teeth as I twisted the handle; it was stiff and seemed to be locked but there was a fraction of movement as I jostled the handle which suggested otherwise. With a final sharp jolt, I finally managed to twist the handle and the door silently slid open. My hands were burning with the friction but I couldn't afford to dwell on that for too long.

"Are we supposed to go down there?" Karinna asked as I rubbed some of the raw flesh on my hand. I narrowed my eyes and peered through the gap in the door, wondering where Karinna's hesitation was coming from.

The room inside certainly wasn't a chamber fit for a noble, in fact it didn't seem to be a chamber at all. The concrete floor gave way to narrow, sloping stairs that disappeared somewhere in the darkness. There were braziers across the walls that lit the way, the flickering flames casting long shadows across the floor as I edged forwards. A sudden cold air pricked at my skin, causing the hairs on my arms to stand up and a deep strike of pain surge through my skull.

Were we supposed to enter the room? Karinna looked dubious, her face strained as she looked into the darkness. But why would the braziers be lit if the room wasn't supposed to be entered? If the whole purpose of the room was to sit and collect dust then no one would have gone to the trouble of lighting each individual candle.

I slowly moved forwards, wondering how on earth we were going to find anything that resembled a clue in this strange, gloomy basement. I peered over my shoulder to see Karinna following close behind me, carefully making sure to leave the door open behind us. Her expression looked as thought she wanted to throttle me more than she did follow me but there was something about the deep gloom that we were entering that made it seem as though speaking to each other was no longer an option.

I edged forwards on something that resembled a platform which led down towards the stairs and hovered over the rest of the cavernous basement. I couldn't make anything out in the semi-darkness aside from the long shadows that stretched across the ceiling and -
I instantly froze at the murmured sound of voices somewhere below us. Was there another team somewhere below us searching for the clue? Were we in the correct place after all? I looked over at Karinna to ask her but, to my surprise, she had begun to edge her way slowly down the stairs, her arm gripping the stone bannister as she peered over the edge.

I silently hurried after her, wondering what on earth had captured her focus so intently but would cause her to try and remain hidden. I slid after her, carefully positioning my feet on each of the narrow steps to avoid tumbling down as I squinted in the darkness to see what Karinna was staring at.

There were other people down there, hence the voices. I couldn't quite make out their faces in the gloomy light but I knew that from the way my heart was violently pounding in my chest that these people weren't just competitive nobles who wanted to be the first to find all of the clues. There was something secretive in the hushed whispers that echoed around the basement, something deliberate about the hazy lighting that obscured them from my vision. I tried to pick out individual words but I was too focused on where to place my feet, how quickly Karinna was moving away from me and attempting to make out their faces.

Why would they feel the need to congregate in a dark, mostly unknown basement of the castle?

I paused for a moment, my clammy hands gripping onto the bannister. I recognized some of the voices that were speaking. I knew that I did, even if I couldn't associate a name to the voices. I knew them, that meant they were most probably Narnians and that would also explain how they knew about this room. I highly doubted whether any of the Lakosians were familiar enough with the castle to know about this place.

They were Narnians. Narnians that were meeting in secret and having whispered discussions and -

A surge of panic flowed through me as my foot slipped from the step with a crunch. It seemed to echo around the room, reverberating off the silence as Karinna met my gaze, her eyes wide with panic.

The murmured voices below us suddenly stopped. I could hear the blood rushing through my ears as I tried to mask the sound of my breathing. Shit. They had heard us. Shit.

"Move!" Karinna hissed, loud enough that I knew the people below us would have been able to hear it. I didn't need to be told twice.

I rushed back up the stairs, keeping my body low and eyes straight ahead of me. The door was still open, the sliver of moonlight shining through the gap as the sound of crunching stone and rock echoed from somewhere below me. They were coming.

I halted for a split second as I reached the door, Karinna breathing raggedly over my shoulder as I checked that the corridor was empty. Thankfully it was, I shot off in the direction that we had come in, pumping my legs as quickly as I could. What would they do if they found us? Who were they?

I pulled Karinna around the corner with me, hair flying around her as we both attempted to calm our breathing for a moment.

"What the hell was that?" Karinna hissed in a hoarse voice and I shrugged; I had absolutely no idea and I hated that I was so clueless. I needed to think and to investigate. I could still feel the panic flooding through my body.

I would think and investigate later. I wouldn't drop the matter until I was presented with an
convincing answer.

"We can focus on it later." I said. "We need to find the rest of the clues first. And then we can figure out what that was all about."

- It's not just all fun and games! What do you think's going on? A secret society? A gang? Something else? Let me know!
Lysa Carker

I tugged my beaten hairbrush through the lengths of my hair, roughly tugging it as it became snagged on a knot. Brushing my hair should be a quick and simple feature in my daily routine and it would have been, if my hair didn't resemble something like a haystack and practically ate the brush. It also didn't help that I was fairly certain my hairbrush could smell whenever I was rushing or hurried or really needed to have finished brushing my hair three minutes ago.

Mother was currently attempting to rest in the room next door to me - she had been awake half the night feeding Mila - and while my brothers were apparently immune to the screaming cries of their baby sister, I was not and I wanted to seize her from where she was flailing around in her crib before she woke mother. She deserved some rest; Joseph, on the other hand, deserved to do something helpful for once in his life.

"Joseph!" I hissed as loudly as I dared up the stairs where I could hear footsteps thumping across the ceiling. I was fortunate to have a room to myself - albeit, a tiny room that could barely fit my bed inside - while my three brothers shared. It was astounding any of them rose before noon to be perfectly honest. "Come and feed Mila!" We had a handful of already prepared bottles so that Mother could rest while someone else fed Mila. I would have done it myself but I was only too aware of how little time I had before I had to be reporting for my morning kitchen shift.

"I have to go to work - " Joseph insisted, jumping down the final stair and landing with a heavy thud on the tiled floor. I rolled my eyes and gave him a sharp stare as I angrily tugged the brush through my hair, ignoring the twinge of pain at my scalp. Mila continued screaming.

"No, you don't. I start work before you do - " It was days like this I really considered just chopping all of my hair off. It was too much hassle than it was worth sometimes.

"Bertie, I need you to feed Mila." I insisted, without turning my back as footsteps pattered into the kitchen. Bertie was a year away from getting a job and was therefore ensuring that he used every single free second that he had to his advantage; mainly, he used every free second that he had to stare at Rosie Wrayburn who lived across the street and whose father was a rope maker. "Were you staring at Rosie again?"

"No."

"Yes." Joseph interrupted, nudging my aside in an attempt to check his reflection in the mirror as he hurriedly ran his fingers through his shaggy hair. "She'll think you're spying on her at this rate."

"If you like her so much then you should go and talk to her." I said, finally admitting defeat with my hair and passing the hairbrush to Joseph as I turned to scoop Mila up in my arms. Her tiny face was pink was screaming and the tuft of red hair that was sprouting from her crown almost blended in with her skin. I gently started rocking her, cautious not to let her drool all over the front of my clean blue dress as I checked the time again. Sixteen minutes.

Bertie was going to have to stay in and watch Mila until Mother woke up, Rosie Wrayburn or no Rosie Wrayburn.

"Good, I thought I'd missed you." Father came rushing down the stairs, a clean white apron replacing the one he'd come home wearing yesterday that had been stained with at least five different
varieties of jam.

"No, Tristan's supposed to be picking me up." I said, passing him to Mila as he gestured for her.

"Right." I immediately frowned at Father's wary tone and became even more suspicious when I saw Joseph roll his eyes. He was now considered old enough to be a part of most family discussions, seeing as he was almost two years younger than me, and was always the first person that I went to if I wanted to find out what had been happening while I had been working. His curiosity held no bounds.

"What is it?" I asked, watching Father press a kiss to Mila's head. I knew that he was seriously overbearing and protective, but what had I done now? I certainly couldn't think of anything...He sighed.

"Me and your Mother have been thinking." This had been a late-night conversation then. The best ones always were. "And we were wondering if it would be a good idea for you to take some time off work."

"What? No, I'm not doing that." Where on earth was this idea coming from? We needed my wage, particularly now that we had another mouth to feed. There was no way we could survive without it. "Why?"

Father didn't answer me for a moment, continuing to bounce Mila on his hip and speak to her in the murmured, garbled voice that everyone used when they were talking to babies. He was delaying the obvious; I wasn't stupid. I knew the conversations that other members of the kitchen staff had been having with their parents and friends.

"It's about the murders, isn't it?"

"We just don't think it's very safe." He said in a firm voice, his dark blue eyes meeting mine. "And a kitchen girl was killed..."

"That doesn't mean that I'll be." I said, wincing at how blunt and stark my words sounded. I hadn't meant it like that, only that Sophia's death didn't mean the entirety of the castle staff were now under threat. It had been Sir Randell, Sophia and now another noblewoman according to the rumours that had been killed. The majority the victims had been nobles, not servants.

But if the killer was following a pattern...

"We just don't think the castle is particularly safe at the moment." Father carried on as Bertie slunk out the door and Joseph disappeared into the adjoining room, a mug of something in his hand that was probably for Mother. "And we'd feel better if you stayed at home, Lysa." There was an angry tone to his voice and while I could understand the feeling behind it, I thought it was unnecessary.

"I'm not just going to abandon them while I stay at home." I said firmly. "And anyway, if someone wants to kill me it won't matter if I'm in the kitchens or at home. They'll get me either way."

"You don't owe them anything." He said harshly, making it plain who he was referring to. Father had always been somewhat dubious and unfriendly towards the nobles and I didn't think he would ever understand how I could become so close to someone, someone who was a noble at that, who was also affectively my mistress.

"They're my friends." He was of a generation where personal feelings were kept out of the workplace; he couldn't understand how I could be friends with someone I 'looked after', as he put it. But I didn't care. "I'm not just going abandon Georgie. She needs all the help she can get."
Did Father know about the lady in the lake? This was what she being referred to as among many of the servants because we were yet to discover her true identity. There were so many nobles living in the castle that I couldn't identify who I hadn't seen at breakfast, though that could have been because most of the nobles had been sleeping after the scavenger hunt last night. Father was yet to make a direct reference to her death which made me think he was currently unaware. How would he react if he knew?

"It's dangerous, Lysa." I could see the frustration building in his face. "I am your father and -"

I had never been so thankful for a knock on the front door. I was not having this conversation. I knew my parents were worried about me, if they weren't worried I would be hurt, but giving up my position in the household would be giving in to the perpetrator of the crimes. I wasn't going to let my fear dictate my life choices.

"Morning." I forced a smile as I opened the door and looked up at Tristan who was leaning against the doorframe, a package in his hands. My eyes immediately fell to his hair; I was certain the only task he had accomplished this morning was walking to my house and his hair was already a mess. I was beginning to think that it was physically impossible for it to stay flat and neat for any time period longer than five minutes, but that was just something that I liked about him.

"Morning," He leaned forward to kiss me, quickly adjusting his trajectory to my cheek when he realised my father was stood in the kitchen. "Are you expecting anything? This was on your doorstep?"

I frowned and shook my head, stepping backwards to let him enter. The package was fairly large and quite flat, tied with a large satin ribbon. As far as I knew, we weren't expecting any kind of deliveries and certainly not items that would be tied with bows. Milk, perhaps, but not...whatever was in the box.

"Perhaps you have a secret admirer?" Tristan asked with a grin, carefully placing the box down on the kitchen table. I rolled my eyes and began carefully untying the ribbon so that I could use it for another use later, maybe tying my hair back or I could attempt to sew it onto one of my gowns.

I began cautiously peeling back the layers of paper and tissue that covered the package, aware of both Tristan and my Father's stares on me. Had my parents ordered something without my knowledge? I highly doubted it; the package seemed to be much more luxurious than anything we could afford.

"You're keeping us in suspense here." Tristan chortled but I ignored him, finally peeling away the last layer of paper and feeling as though my eyes were going to pop out of their sockets and roll to the floor. I felt myself audibly gasp, the breath being stolen from my lungs for a moment.

Inside was a dress, the most beautiful dress that I had ever held in my hands in my entire life. It was a pale forest green with wide swooping sleeves and a delicately embodied bodice of silver and gold thread. I didn't even have to try it on to know that it would fit perfectly. I could feel the tears brimming behind my eyes and I mentally cursed myself; I wasn't going to let myself cry over something as trivial and unimportant as a dress.

"But how?" I gasped, looking over at Tristan who was still grinning. He shrugged, a faint blush dusting his cheeks.

"I thought you could wear it for the servant's ball tonight. Now you don't have to worry anymore."

"This was you?" It was far too much for my brain to comprehend; I couldn't understand that this
beautiful thing that I was holding in my hands was actually mine and that I was actually going to be able to wear it tonight. Tonight.

"I came up with the idea. It's Georgie you really need to thank, she's the one who made it." Georgie. Of course she had. Beautiful, thoughtful, selfless Georgie. I narrowed my eyes.

"But I would have known if she was making this." I said slowly, still confused. "I would have seen her sewing it." Tristan shrugged again.

"It was a bit of a struggle but you're not exactly the hardest person to deceive." I glared at him for a moment before the smile burst onto my face. Father looked as confounded as I felt, but at least Mila seemed to have finally settled in his arms. "The day when Georgie had a migraine, after Sophia's body was found - "

"I told her to rest." I said, ignoring the sharp look that Father gave Tristan.

"And she rested by staying in her chamber all day and sewing your dress." I should have been angry that Georgie had dismissed my advice, especially when it concerned her own health but I couldn't find it in myself to become frustrated, not since I was holding the most beautiful garment I had ever owned in my hands.

I draped the dress over my arm and hurried upstairs to my room, knowing that I had minutes before I needed to leave for the kitchens. I felt as though the fear and panic that had settled itself into my gut had been completely replaced with joy and excitement and love that Georgie and Tristan, mainly Georgie, would go to so much effort in order to make something for me.

And besides, Tristan and his wonderful gift had saved me from having an angry conversation with my father. There was no way that he would dare arguing with me in front of Tristan, he was far too proud for that. I knew that he meant well and wanted me to be safe and I appreciated that, but that didn't mean I was prepared to abandon Georgie either.
Chapter 39

Lord Markus Howard

I raised my face to the brisk winter air, inhaling a deep breath as I gripped onto the wall and looked out over the grounds. I had been enjoying my leisurely walk for the last twenty minutes or so and every muscle in my body was urging me to return to my chamber, lie down and sleep for the rest of the day. I couldn't do that, however, no matter how much I wanted to and no matter how much I regretted that celebratory glass of whiskey this morning when I had returned to my chamber after the scavenger hunt.

I was surprised I had even managed to remain conversational during my meeting with Connell over lunch but I was more than relieved that I had. He had finally confirmed the deal between his own territories and Wedgemore and I had almost choked on my salmon when I had heard his words. Not because I had been surprised, per say, but there were always unforeseen circumstances that disrupted my grand plans. This time, it seemed, something had gone accordingly.

We had agreed to give Connell a share of our many resources - it was mainly cloth and honey, a peculiar combination but I hadn't gone as far as denying his request - and in return he was giving us the backing of his armed forces and a cut of his artillery. It also helped that Connell wasn't a complete and utter dick and could be rather charming when the situation called for it; the only thing I would have to be wary of was his habit of sometimes attacking first and asking questions later.

Torian had joked that this could also be said for myself and Georgie; but while we were both stubborn and strong-willed, we never let that cloud our judgement when the lives of our citizens were involved.

Speaking of Georgie, I now needed to find her in order to tell her the good news. I was still feeling a slight shred of guilt, despite the fact that we had made up and I had explained that my absence had been because of Connell, not because of a festering grudge. At least this piece of news would be able to show just what my efforts had amalgamated into.

I had never found Georgie to be a particularly difficult person to find - perhaps that was just because I knew her exceptionally well and could identify all of her favourite hiding spots - but I had been searching for her since I had left my meeting with Connell and, so far, had nothing to show for my efforts. I had managed to see practically every single noble other than Georgie, which was maddeningly unhelpful, as well as being irritating because it meant I had had to see all the people that I didn't like. Or rather, all the people who seemed to have a problem with me.

I knew that none of them would every admit to their dislike of me if asked and I doubted whether they would ever explicitly say it to my face but that was less about the rules of the court and more to do with the fact that several people seemed to be living in denial and denying that it was even possible for a person to be attracted to a person who was the same gender as themselves. Or even that the physical body had very little influence on my attraction at all and when it did, it certainly wasn't womanly curves or the fluttering of a lady's eyelashes that I found to be enticing.

Anyway, the people who cared about that kind of thing weren't the people that I had an interest in, whether that was forming an alliance or forming a friendship.

I had already checked Georgie's chamber which had been empty of both her and Lysa, meaning I had been unable to ask her whether she had any idea as to where I could find Georgie. I knew that today would be a busy, if not frantic day for the servants given that the servant's ball was tonight and
many of them were rushing to complete their work in time.

The Servants Ball, aside from being an annual excuse for a party, signified the forthcoming arrival of Yule at some point during the week and, this year, we had only four days to wait until the big day. It also meant that the work day finished at three PM, hence the frantic activity, and also meant that none of them would be wasting any of their energy keeping an eye on my sister.

More's the pity.

I heard a voice calling my name behind me and turned, hoping that it was Georgie and I could finally stop my search. But instead of being greeted with Georgie, it was Karinna who was making her way down the corridor, weaving through the passing servants and nobles. I smirked as she approached, noting the heavy bags under her eyes that weren't quite as deep set as my own.

"I'm surprised that you even want to speak with me." I joked, watching Karinna fold her arms and ruefully smile.

"I'm trying to accept our loss gracefully." She said.

"Tell that to Georgie who looked like she wanted to rip my head off." Perhaps that was why I couldn't find her? She was too ashamed that we had beaten her and had now gone into hiding? It was the strangest, most outlandish theory regarding Georgie that I had ever concocted.

Neither my team or Karinna and Georgie had been the first to complete the hunt, much to our chagrin, but ours had beaten Georgie's back, which counted as an overwhelming victory in my book. Georgie had claimed that Karinna had injured her ankle running up some stairs which had ultimately slowed their pace but, as we both started walking down the corridor, I could detect no sign of injury in her gait or any show of pain on her face.

It had definitely been an attempt to save face and made me feel even more smug about our victory. That probably made me even more of a bastard but the Howard competitive spirit was a easily traceable characteristic in our family's history and I certainly wasn't going to try and dampen mine.

Georgie didn't have to know that I really had tripped walking up some stairs in order to beat them when we had spied them crossing the grounds. I had sworn both Caspian and Julien to secrecy.

"Are you trying to find Georgie, too?" I asked, sliding my hands into my pockets. My hands were always the first part of me to feel the chill and I had been scared of getting frostbite ever since my Uncle had scared me with the tales as a child. It still didn't sound particularly pleasant.

"No, I know where she is." She said. "Or at least I did; she was speaking with Lucille when I last saw her."

"Right. I need to talk to her."

"And I need to talk to you." I raised an eyebrow in her direction as we turned a corner.

"What about?" I narrowed my eyes. "Is everything alright?"

"You were friends with Sir Randell, right?" She said, lowering her voice slowly as though she didn't want anyone else to hear.

"I wouldn't have exactly said friends." I said with a grimace. "More like I knew him by association." I paused for a moment, watching Karinna's carefully calculating face. "This is about the detective's club that you've formed with Georgie, Lysa, Julien and the King, isn't it?" Karinna rolled my eyes at
"It's not a club." She insisted, though from what I had heard that was exactly what it sounded like. "We're trying to figure out what's going, just like everyone else."

"Sounds fun." I said with a smug, thinking how Georgie had created a fairly ingenious plan in which to spend more time with the King and also get Karinna and Julien to spend more time together. She was awfully crafty.

I could tell Karinna was beginning to get slightly irked by my incessant smirking and this was encouraging me to do it even more. It was entertaining irritating someone who wasn't Georgie; because among all of this terrible news and fear, if someone didn't keep everyone feeling something other than panic and dread then the perpetrator of the crimes wouldn't need to do much to tear the entire kingdom down.

"What do you want to know?" I said finally, giving Karinna a smile. She sighed and swallowed, shifting her eyes to straight in front of her as we made our way down the corridor.

"We're trying to find a connection between the victims." She said. "Sir Randell, Sophia Clangrove, Jaqueline Murnot…"

The rumours were true, then. There had been speculation surrounding the lady in the lake's identity flying around all morning and this was the name I had heard repeated the most often but there had been so confirmation as to whether this was the truth or not. I had had little communication with Lady Jaqueline really and knew little about her, aside from the fact she was the daughter of a knight and was particularly friendly with Lucille and her cohorts.

"We thought you might know something about Sir Randell. You must have spent a lot of time with him." I nodded. I had spent a lot of time with him, though none of it had ever been out of choice. He had never been one of my favourite people and I knew that I was not the only one who held this opinion.

"I know he was born in the city." I said, slowing my pace slightly. This conversation was one that I had had with myself several times while trying to fall asleep; was there something that I knew that would explain just why the perpetrator had picked Randell specifically? "His father was a soldier and his mother came from a well respected family; he didn't have any siblings, either, or at least none that I knew of. He never married, but considering how many liaisons with women he's had over the years I wouldn't rule it out completely."

"Was he a good soldier?" Karinna asked. "Was he as good as everyone said he was?" I nodded.

"The talk about him being one of the best in the army isn't exaggerating. He was. That doesn't mean he was a good person, however."

"No."

"His favourite pastime was either drinking, pestering women or boasting about his victories." I said wryly. "He loved talking about how many battles he'd won and how many people he'd killed, as though that was something to be proud of. He even named his sword Wind-Cleaver because apparently it struck fear into the hearts of his enemies."

I wanted to chuckle at the pomp and ceremony of it all but, considering the stern look on Karinna's face, it didn't seem appropriate. "I can think of plenty reasons why someone could want him dead." I said, presuming this to be Karinna's next question. "But I've no idea how he could be connected to
both Sophia Clangrove and Lady Murnot. Sorry."

"It's okay," Karinna said, staring pensively off into the distance. I frowned and paused for a moment.

"Does this mean that I can be allowed into your murder society now?"
That evening, all of the sorrow and pain that had been caused by the deaths over the last few days seemed to have been temporarily dampened and forgotten in wake of the Servant's Ball which had left the majority of the castle feeling as though it had been deserted with a large concentration of the castle's population currently inside the Great Hall. Considering this was a day of rest for the servants, a selection of nobles were always invited - and sometimes forced - to serve out the food and drink. I was going to offer my own time before Markus had intervened and asked if he could do it instead.

The reason? Torian was also attending the ball. I could hardly reject that reason, especially seeing how much he had tried to hide his excitement. It had been annoyingly endearing.

He knew that I sometimes worried about him being alone around other nobles who weren't exactly discreet about their dislike for him but I couldn't restrict him from living his life; I had to allow him to go out and live it, rather to hide back and live in fear.

And besides, he deserved to go out and enjoy himself after securing our alliance with Connell. It was fantastic - despite Connell's stupid habit of getting himself involved with conflicts that in no way involved him - and also meant that we had a stronger defensive line against any incoming threats. At this moment in time, the main outside threat that was weighing on my mind was Lord Bayard. I hadn't heard from him in a number of days and while I hoped that was because he had finally decided to drop his petty argument, I couldn't wholly rely on this. Battles had been provoked on less; at least now we had the armed forces need to at least try and take him on if the situation called for it.

I couldn't allow myself to get caught up about Bayard. I was told by practically everyone that I worried too much and I had done everything that I could to calm the situation with him. If he chose to attack now, that showed just how much of an imbecile he was.

I had much more important things to feel happy about, anyway. Lysa had adored her dress and the look on her face had made all the hours and all of the times I'd stabbed myself with the sewing needle worth it. She had looked absolutely amazing and I hadn't been the only one who noticed; Tristan had been unable to take his eyes off her, though that was really nothing new considering the way he adored her. I wondered whether I should give her a late start tomorrow, seeing as she might be spending a little extra time with him tonight.

Anyway...

I was determined not to spend the entire evening lurking inside my chamber and, in an attempt to shake off the faint pangs of pain in the back of my skull, I had decided to take a walk. I knew that it was getting late and a lack of sleep never helped my migraines but sometimes the cold did, at the expense of the rest of my body feeling as though it was turning to ice. Going to sleep with a migraine was awful because I would fall into bed with the knowledge that when I awoke in the morning, my head would be pounding.

Besides, I had a lot to keep my mind occupied that wasn't Bayard or Markus.

Earlier, while Karinna had gone to find Markus, I had gone to see Lucille after having enough time to finally digest the news - and the rumours - that had come to light regarding the Lady in the Lake's identity.
She had been a noble, Lady Jaqueline Murnot, and Lucille had been friends with her and despite Lucille's attempts to hide her emotions, a play used by myself too, I had able to read the sadness in her expression and she had appeared to be sadder than I had ever seen her. That had shaken me to my core; Lucille was the strongest person that I knew and I had always known her to be unstoppable. And yet even the strongest could be touched by death.

Lucille had also been able to reveal some more information regarding Jaqueline that hadn't been given in any official statement. I had felt as though I was almost being deceitful in asking Lucille to spill the personal life of her now dead friend but had managed to push away these thoughts; I needed this information in order to give Jaqueline justice and find out who had killed her. I knew that Lucille understood that too.

All of her family were long-dead so she didn't have any next-of-kin or relatives who might have been able to shed some more light on her personal life. I also learned that her name meant wave in some ancient, long-dead language that Jaqueline was able to read which explained why she was always dressed as a mermaid whenever she met with gentlemen. Lucille had added that she had looked like one with her beautiful long hair; hair that had been covered in her own blood when she had been pulled from the lake if rumours were to be believed.

I hadn't been surprised that Lucille had commented on the 'deal', as she called it, that I had formed with the King. I thought that 'deal' was a bit far, when in fact it had been Karinna and Lysa who had spoken with him and the fact that whenever I considered the possibility of speaking with the King and telling him what we'd found out, my stomach began to tingle.

As well as asking her about Jaqueline, I had also asked her if she’d found anything out about Florence. That evening seemed to be a whole world away from now; it was impossible to think that a mere possible attempted poisoning could turn into a triple murder investigation in the space of a few days. But the issue of what had happened that night was driving me insane. We both agreed that whoever had put the unicorn head inside my chamber and had also probably manipulated the ice, too. It could have been a coincidence because ice cracked all the time but, somehow, with everything that had been going on lately it didn't seem normal, whether that was one person or group of people.

So, while I had manage to glean a few more details about Jaqueline it was nothing that really helped me to figure out who the perpetrator of the crimes was. The meaning of her name didn't give me any extra insight into who would want her dead.

Markus had told Karinna a few things that he knew about Randell and this had reached a similar conclusion. We needed to try and find a connection between the victims because there must be one somewhere. At this point, the deaths seemed to be so specific and calculated that I refused to believe the deaths were simply random.

And then there was the bizarre cult meeting Karinna and I had walked in on, or whatever that meeting had been about that we had quickly ran out of. I knew that there had been secret groups and sects around since the dawn of time but there was something about this sect existing at the same time as a triple murder happening that made it impossible for me to ignore it. The only reason a cult could feel the need to hide in an abandoned cellar was is if they were doing something they shouldn't be doing and didn't want to be discovered.

Like, executing a triple murder, for example.

Oh shit...

That was exactly what Lucille had been theorising about earlier when she had been imagining the composition of such a group: a group of people who wished to cause chaos and make a fool of the
King simultaneously, such a group who might feel the need to disguise their and hide their meetings from any prying eyes who would report them for their actions.

My heart was beginning to pound as I paused my strides, the faint echoes of music floating through the air. I needed to try and find out just who was a member of this group. That way, I could be half way towards figuring out the perpetrator's identity and their motivations. The truth was staring me in the eyes.

I needed to back. I needed to go back down there.

And try not to become a ritual sacrifice, as well as hope that they would even have meetings over two consecutive days.

They hadn’t seemed to be the type of group to conduct ritual sacrifices, yesterday they had seemed to be doing a lot of talking rather than anything else, but I couldn't be sure. Someone had butchered the unicorn and tied its head to my bedpost; they seemed like a likely option.

I turned on my heel, quickly walking in the opposite direction towards the corridor where the basement was located. I was thankful that many people were occupied with the Servants Ball; that left fewer people to spot me and start to ask questions.

I needed to find out who was involved in this sect, this cult, whatever word I wanted to associate with the group. It might allow me to start putting some of the pieces together - or it could simply lead me around in circles.

But I would never know if I didn’t try.

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I turned the door handle, prepared for the strength that I would need to grip it with, and noted that this was most probably a deterrent for people - if they tried the door and presumed it locked, then they would never try to open it again and would never risk exposing the ground. They had simply been unlucky that Karinna and I had been so desperate to win the scavenger hunt that we had been willing to try every single door that we came across.

Every instinct I had was telling me to turn and run as I silently pushed the door open and slipped inside before gently pushing it closed without shutting it completely. I held my breath as I became cloaked in darkness, allowing my eyes to adjust to the low visibility and allowing my ears to pick up the quiet murmurs of the voices below. The air was clammy, the moisture thick and heavy in the air, and the thick cloak that was hung around my shoulders instantly began to stifle me.

I just needed to take one step at a time, both physically and metaphorically because I really did not want to tumble down the steps. That really would be the worst way that this scenario could end; either my death, long-term embarrassment or the end of this entire venture.

I crouched down again, keeping my body low and one had clutched onto the bannister as I slowly began to descend down the staircase, my eyes peering through the darkness down into the cavern below. There seemed to be more shadows - more people - than there had been last night. What did that mean? I was trying to pick out faces while listening to the quiet voices. They all spoke so damn quietly.

My ears suddenly pricked up and I felt my blood run cold. I clutched more tightly onto the bannister, still crouched, my thighs burning with effort. Someone was talking about the King, a word my mind automatically registered above all others. I listened closer, catching something about how little he seemed to be reacting which caused someone else to input that of course he had to act this way, he had to pretend to have everything under control while inside the unsolved murders will tear him
I felt my chest begin to constrict; they sounded sadistic, apathetic, indifferent. The voice speaking now was low and gravely, clearly belonging to a man, and in fact many of the figures stood below me appeared to be men, though I would guess that a handful of smaller figures could be women too.

And yet, I didn't think they were responsible for the murders. They seemed to be talking about the murders, rather than their active participation in them. As I had predicted, I thought that the perpetrator was most likely one person while the perpetrator behind the more petty crimes seemed to be pointing towards a group of people. This group of people? It seemed fairly likely.

I honed in on the man who was currently speaking, one who was stood reasonably close to where I was hiding. I knew that I recognised his voice, the smart confident tone, his upright posture and -

Fuck. Was that Connell? Really?
I could feel the nausea growing in the pit of my stomach. Had we really chosen that man as an ally - a man contributing to the chaos reigning throughout the court? Really?

No. There had to be something else occurring here. Didn't there?

I focused in on the man who was now interrupting, his figure tall and imposing as he stepped into the center of the circle and a sliver of light that illuminated the cavern from one of the braziers glowing on the walls. With his impressive height, my first thought was that he seemed to resemble Sternwood but that theory was ridiculous.

Wait. Wasn't it?

My heart was beginning to beat even faster; my palms were sweating as I gripped onto the slick marble. Connell and Sternwood? Surely I couldn't have imagined that -

I locked eyes with someone across the room, the fear instantly shooting into my stomach. I felt as though I was going to vomit. I knew those eyes. I had teased those eyes. Julien.

I couldn't think straight. Nothing made sense, nothing was linking up in my mind to create a coherent argument. My breathing was beginning to labor, the reality of what I was seeing overriding my senses.

I wanted to get out of there. I needed to. Had they seen me? Probably, but I didn't stay long enough to worry as I moved as fast as I dared, my muscles cramping and the humid air sticking to my skin.

I wanted Karinna. I wanted someone to speak this through with, someone who could comprehend the things that I had seen or thought I had seen. It couldn't have been them; that would be impossible.

And yet, before today, I thought it was impossible for Lucille to cry.

Nothing was impossible anymore.

- Dun dun DUNNN!
I rolled my head to the side, cracking my neck, as I rested my chin on the palm of my hand. The library was deserted, the silence unnerving, but I found it to be a more comforting alternative to the starkness of my chamber. I had been trying for hours to sleep and had found it impossible with the theories and questions that had been flying around my head, desperate for some kind of release. I needed to write them down, think them through and find some kind of sense in my jumbled thoughts; the library was endlessly more comforting than the empty gloom of my own chamber.

And besides, the library allowed me to read the books that I didn't feel comfortable having in my chamber. That nauseous, nervous feeling had been growing inside of me for days now; I felt as though my own body was growing further and further beyond my control and all it was going to take was something to shake me in the wrong way and I would explode beyond repair.

I wasn't going to let that happen. I was going to restrain my thoughts and avoid getting too emotional because that made the feeling of having no control more visceral and all the more intense inside of me. I couldn't allow myself to explode.

"I thought I would find you here - " My head shot up, my hand involuntarily reaching out to cover the book that I was reading. I let out a sigh, watching Georgie pull the chair that was facing me out from under the table. Her hair was flowing down her back, a soft mauve dressing gown wrapped around her and I watched her eyes flicker down to the book hidden under my arm before flickering back to my face.

"You scared the hell out of me." I said with a sigh, brushing the hair from my face, and allowing myself to relax. It was Georgie. I could be completely myself around Georgie.

"Sorry," She said with a smile. "Can't sleep?" I shook my head and she nodded. "I don't want to try and sleep with a migraine because I know how that turns out."

"You have a migraine?" I narrowed my eyes and Georgie shrugged.

"A small one, but that's not why I tracked you and found you here. I went back - "

"Went back to what?" I asked, trying to hide the panic that I was slowly trying to dissolve inside me. I needed to pull myself together.

"The meeting, the cult, whatever name we're using to refer to that strange collection of people in a basement we found yesterday - "

"Why? It could have been dangerous - "

"Because I had to." She said firmly. I knew that secret societies were hardly a new phenomena; there had been different groups and sects hiding from the majority population since the dawn of time. "We've been searching for a group of people who are causing problems and want to remain hidden. What if it's that group? It's the only lead we have right now and it seems awfully apt for us to discover a secret group when one is going around causing chaos."

I couldn't be angry at her for long, even though she had placed herself in danger for no real substantial reason. Georgie smirked at me as I remained silent and I rolled my eyes.
"It's a possibility." I admitted, watching Georgie smile, "and the only secret group that we know of right now but still." If this group really were the one we were searching for, the one who had poisoned Lady Swifton and butchered the unicorn and manipulated the ice in the lake, then that could answer so many of our questions.

But I still couldn't shake the feeling that it was the killer we should be searching for rather than a group of misfits.

"What did you find out?" I asked, Georgie adjusting the oil lamp that I had burning in front of me to produce a brighter flame.

"They were talking about how the King doesn't seem to be reacting to the murders," She said slowly, "which is what made me think that they aren't the ones doing the killing." I nodded.

"Who was down there? Could you see any faces?" Georgie sighed, looking down at her hands and biting her lip. What did that mean? "Who? Georgie - "

"Connell." She said sharply and it took a second for me to remember that this was the man she and Markus had recently formed an alliance with. I really hoped that Georgie was mistaken.

"Really?"

"Maybe." She said dejectedly, pulling at the hem of her dressing gown. "It was difficult to see."

"This is Connell, the man who you've just agreed to trade with?"

"Yes, that one." Georgie said dryly. I didn't know what to say. I was struggling to believe that Narnians could be behind the attacks and certainly not Connell. I had never considered him to be an anarchist.

"That's not good." I said, immediately cringing at my own words because they were so obvious. Georgie, thankfully, reserved her glare for the oil lamp in front of her.

"It might not be him." She said slowly, an attempt to convince herself of this fact I presumed. I could see the tightness in her shoulders, the strain pushing through her hands and down her spine. There was something else she wasn't saying; she had seen more than just Connell.

"Who else?" I asked with narrowed eyes, the words almost dying on my tongue. I wanted to know, I needed to know if we were going to reach a greater understanding of just who was involved in the chaos, but the begrudging, almost despairing, look on Georgie's face made me pause.

"I think - " Georgie halted, turning away from me and shaking her head. "I don't know if - I could be wrong. I'm probably wrong. But I saw a man who, at least in my eyes, greatly resembled your father."

"No." The word left my lips before I could even think, this involuntary sensation throwing me off guard. Every single part of me was screaming that this idea was ridiculous and nonsensical. I couldn't think of anybody who was more loyal to the crown and the King than my father, except perhaps for Julien and his mother. But he had spent almost his entire life protecting the monarchy; he had served under Caspian's father and had even started his service under Caspian's grandfather.

The entire notion was absurd. My logical, pragmatic mind had been taken over by my emotions and my defiance, something that I had told myself I would not do. I clenched my fists and forced a deep breath through my lungs, the nausea already bubbling in my stomach as my palms began to sweat.
No. My father was not involved. He couldn't be. It was impossible.

"And I think I saw someone else." She said hesitantly. "Maybe. I don't know."

"Who?" My hands were gripping the table, Every possible answer was flying through my head. Georgie obviously thought this individual would be more shocking to me than my own father, but he wasn't involved. I wouldn't believe it.

"Julien." I let the name circle around my mind, hovering above my processors without landing. The name almost didn't register with me, as though I had no emotional connection to the person the name belonged to.

"No."

"I only said maybe," Georgie defended.

"Why would he be in a group that is working against his best friend? It makes no sense - "

"Nothing about this whole thing makes sense." Georgie said harshly, making me pause for a moment. There was no evidence, other than a glimpse of a face in a darkened room, that Julien or my father had anything to do with this society. They were merely guesses and guesses were often incorrect.

Georgie's guesses, however, were often more than accurate.

"We have more questions than answers." Georgie continued, her eyes blazing and her hands waving around her face in frustration. "None of the facts seem to be related and the longer we spend fussing around having no clue what we are doing then the more people are going to die at the hands of this psychopath!"

I didn't know how to respond. Every one of her words were valid and honest; everything she was feeling was a sentiment I had already felt - the frustration, the anger, the panic. What could we do when we were left with nothing? The only thing keeping me sane was the knowledge that I had to keep my emotions under control; I couldn't allow myself the release that Georgie just had. I didn't know how far I would let go of myself and therefore, how much energy I would need to pull myself back together. And if I even had that energy...

"Sorry," Georgie murmured, turning for a moment to gaze around her. Her voice was echoing boldly around the silent room, the stacks almost reverberating in the semi-darkness. "I'm just tired. I shouldn't be taking it out on you."

"We need to connect Randell and Jaqueline Murnot." I said with a smile that I hoped was sincere.

"I think Randell's a dead end." Georgie said. "We know that he was a moron and would treat people terribly but could throw his sword around which, somehow, apparently makes up for all that - "

"His sword was called wind-cleaver." I said suddenly, recalling this piece of information that I had initially dismissed as unimportant." Georgie frowned.

"What?"

"That was what he called his sword, according to Markus." I explained and Georgie began to smirk. I had to admit that the name was hardly original and something of a cliché; it seemed his manliness made up for his ignorant attitude and his lack of creativity also.
"We know that Jaqueline went by the name Gal whenever she saw clients." Georgie said, repeating the information that she had recalled to me a matter of hours ago. "She dressed as a mermaid, that name means wave, she was found in the lake - " Georgie suddenly trailed off, her eyes growing wide as she sat up a little straighter in her chair.

"What?" I frowned, my eyes running over her expression. "What is it?"

"Randell's sword was wind-cleaver; Jaqueline was found in the lake, dressed as a mermaid and her name means wave."

"They're the elements." I murmured as Georgie nodded, a look of almost euphoria crossing her face. It was something that connected them, a common thread that could be traced and linked between all those killed. "And Sophia - "

"She must be earth. She worked in the kitchens; her job was to prepare and cook the fruits of the earth." It was all beginning to make sense.

"All we need now is fire." That meant one more death, one more loss of innocent life. And yet something inside of me was glad that there would only be one more. Hopefully...

"I don't understand why someone would chose this methodology however but - "

"There could be a religious motivation after all." I said. "Many pagan religious base their practices on the natural and spiritual word. They feel deeply connected to the four elements."

"It doesn't feel to be religious, exactly." Georgie murmured, her fingers tapping against the table. "More as though this is a ritual they need to complete. They pick people with certain characteristics - people who fit each of the four elements - and then they kill them."

"What do you think happens when the ritual is completed?" I asked, ideas already swirling around my mind. "It could mean that the killing will stop; the perpetrator will have achieved their goal. Or, this could just be the very beginning - "

"We need to do some more research." I said, my mind already delving into the possible books that I could look at, the individual texts that could be useful.

"It's a good job that I know someone who is exceptional at research." Georgie said with a teasing smile. It wasn't going to matter how good at researching I was; I couldn't prevent a psychopath from killing with only the power of words. It was going to take force, the army, the justice system, to stop what was happening. And, even then, words would never be able to give the innocent victims their lives back.

It was as good a place to start than any, however.

And the only option we had right now.
Chapter 42

Lady Lucille Mariel

I flopped onto my back, letting out a groan as I forced my eyes open. My chamber was pitch-black, aside from a sliver of light peeking through the curtains. I was unaware of the hour, other than it being late, and I had been attempting to sleep since the moment I had fallen into bed what seemed like days ago. I hated nights like this: the ones that seemed to stretch on forever and the root cause of my sleeplessness was staring at me straight in the eyes.

I couldn't stop thinking of Jaqueline. Every time I closed my eyes I saw her face blinking back at me with her deep brown eyes. The moment I had found out it was as though the air had been removed from my lungs and ever since I had been consumed by bitter sadness and anger that struck me down to my core. I had considered her to be one of my only true friends and she was never going to be in my life again; I was going to go have to walk the same steps and repeat the same routine without her being by my side.

I really wanted to slap somebody. I wanted an output for the anger that was fizzing inside of me, the anger that usually rested dormant in my stomach and I was able to channel into other pursuits. But now, I knew no way that I would be able to completely remove the anger from within myself.

Someone had hurt her and killed her and thrown her into a lake to freeze. When I found out who the perpetrator was, I was going to destroy them from the inside out for what they had done to her.

I pulled my legs up towards me, digging my fingernails into my palms. That was the part that was churning my stomach the most - I had been trying for days to find out what had happened to Florence to no avail. How was I supposed to find Jaqueline's killer?

The king and the army were working tirelessly to find the perpetrator and now Georgie had apparently set her mind into working out the truth with the help of Karinna and Markus. Together it seemed certain that we would be able to solve the problem that we had been affronted with. And yet, no matter how many times I reminded myself of this, it couldn't dampen my frustration and my fury.

Sighing, I pushed the covers from over me and headed for the dining table where I knew the wine decanter and glass would be waiting, the chill of the marble floor sinking into the soles of my feet. This was something I had drifted to more often than I wanted to admit in the last few days. Wine was certainly not going to make it easier for me to sleep and I knew that it was pointless to try and dull my thoughts with alcohol but I was going to try.

I had spent enough time wallowing in my own thoughts to try and sleep. I had to try and distract myself to the point where I would be able to sleep.

I slumped down onto one of the ridiculously stiff and uncomfortable chairs, my now full glass in hand. My eyes were beginning to adjust to the darkness, the shadowy silhouettes of the bulky furniture, the swathes of cream velvet that were draped over the foot of the bed and hung from the windows and matched the wallcoverings.

If someone ever told me that I had to move to a different chamber then I would undoubtedly refuse. My chamber might be one of the smallest on the corridor and perhaps the smallest of all the nobles - not that I could exactly consider myself to be much of a noble anymore. I had had enough people tell me more than enough times just exactly how highly they valued my title and my nobility; but my
Parents, sister, brother-in-law, husband and children were dead. Everyone who I could still hold accountable for my title was gone. The only people left were my nephew and niece who were barely more than children and a brother who didn't deserve to be more than a speck of dirt on the sole of my shoe.

There had been far too much death lingering around the castle grounds recently, for my liking. I had experienced enough death, I wanted to experience life and live and build a better life for those around me using any means necessary. Even if that meant punching someone in the face and suffering through a couple of weeks trapped in a cell. I didn't care. I had lost enough to become desperate.

Hence the wine. Wine didn't judge; wine just assisted.

I turned my head, gulping down half my glass and gazing over at the candelabra in the center of the table that I could not find the energy to light. Yule was supposed to be hopeful and positive and about finding yourself for the new year ahead - Yule was not supposed to be about finding dead bodies in corridors.

I had almost fainted when I heard the news that Georgie had been the one to discover Sophia's body. I could remember precisely the exact moment that I had heard; I had questioned a servant as to just what the hell he was blabbering on to his fellow valet about, swore loudly when he mentioned Georgie's name and caused the noblewoman walking next to me to turn and glare in my direction.

Noblewomen glared at me often enough for me to be indifferent to it all now; they weren't my priority when many of them didn't contain enough brain power for them to be worthy of my time. Georgie and Markus had to be my priority - they had coped with enough pain and death, particularly Georgie, and I'd be damned if they suffered anymore when I could have prevented it.

That was the main reason I felt so strongly about finding the identity of whoever was responsible for the crimes, the reason I was pushing all the resources at my disposal out into the field to find out whatever they could, regardless of whether or not we would lose ourselves money in the process. Some of the girls had begun to question some of my motives but I had quickly quelled any of these musings. I didn't have time to be dealing with their complaints.

I leaned back slightly in my chair, pressing the goblet to my lips. Jaqueline and Georgie. That was who I was doing this for. I didn't have time to consider the petty crimes that seemed to be occurring - crimes that certainly weren't petty when examined individually but seemed inconsequential when compared to brutal murder.

And, a selfish voice in the back of my head whispered, for my own satisfaction and worth; to remind myself that I could achieve some good that wasn't simply stock-piling gold and intimidating husbands.

Court was a breeding ground for mystery and devious plot however and I had known from the very beginning that unravelling the clues would not be as simple as the King and his soldiers were pretending it was. There were so many corrupt figures and shady personalities that disguised their true motives and desires that inhabited the court that I was spoilt for choice for which trail I wanted to follow. The list of suspects was overwhelming large. Any person could be perceived as a convincing perpetrator if examined from the right angle.

Take Queen Estella for example, a figure that I had spent a long time contemplating the behavior of over the last few days. Some people perceived her to be a strong, powerful, inspirational leader while other people saw as little other than a cold-hearted bitch, if gossip was to believed which I often thought it was.
Then again, many people conflicted over the same opinions in regards to Hestia and, in this way, they were frightfully similar and considering these similarities I had begun to consider whether this was more a musing on women in positions of power rather than their actual characters.

Nevertheless, I wouldn't put it past either of them to do whatever it took to achieve their aims. Did that include murder? I wasn't sure.

What exactly did Hestia have to gain from killing three of her own court? It was certainly more than Estella would get out of it and, with practically a private army at her disposal, Hestia could easily pay someone to commit the murders on her behalf. That wouldn't be difficult to conceive.

And yet, I was still unsure as to what positive outcome this could possibly bring for her. The most obvious outcome of the events was the steadily brewing conflict between the Lakosians and the Narnians and so, the next natural question, was to consider who wanted the alliance the least.

I would immediately point a figure towards the King for that - at the beginning, it had been obvious how uncomfortable the talk of his and Estella's engagement had been making him feel - but I knew that there was no conceivable way that he would ever be capable of becoming a serial killer and doing harm to his own citizens. A far more realistic idea would be to look towards the Lakosians; it was quite conceivable several of them to hold particular distaste towards him considering the history between Caspian's family and the Lakosians.

His ancestors has been responsible for a partial massacre of their people; the prospect of some of them despising him enough to hatching a plan to ruin the alliance was not completely out of the question and, in fact, they probably had several creative ways that they wished to kill him as well as random members of his court. They probably perceived him to be childish and arrogant and an unstable leader, comments that I had heard spoken by members of his own court in the early days of his reign. And obviously he had made mistakes in his past but that was because he was young and learning and should be allowed to do that.

He may have previously done things that had made me wan to temporarily strangle him but ultimately I trusted that his heart was in the right place and that, most of the time at least, he had a calm head atop his shoulders.

I knew that my sentiment did not run throughout the castle and could this be any more evident than a group of rebels hatching a plan to disrupt his reign and place their own monarch on his throne?
Lady Georgiana Howard

Unsurprisingly, I was able to catch very few hours of sleep that night as a result of the new information continually circling around inside my head; the deaths were no longer random and in fact each victim was judiciously chosen to fulfil the criteria. We had been busy trying to identify what all the victims had in common and how that could link them to a perpetrator which had been, in fact, a huge misuse of our time.

This new information scared me more, however, than the deaths simply being random; a ritual that involved dead bodies and murder could never result in something positive. I just had to hope we would be able to stop it.

After dressing and eating breakfast, I left Lysa rearranging throw pillows and set out into the castle. I needed to find Caspian - which was something I never thought I would say, seeing as I often spent my time trying to avoid him in order to save myself the embarrassment - and tell him about the information we had uncovered last night. I hoped that as we would be discussing the topic of murder our exchange would able to be strictly professional, as though that would save me from flushing slightly if I directly met his gaze.

I quickly checked his chamber, which the guards stationed outside informed me was empty of both Caspian and Tristan, so I couldn't enquire about his location. The guards were also maddeningly unhelpful, leaving me no choice but to wander around until I found him. I had a couple of locations that I thought would be favorable for him but a brisk morning walk would also give me the opportunity to think about things and, I felt as though I hadn't stopped thinking about how the cold air helped my migraines, it would help to clear my head.

This time, however, I had new information to ponder over.

Even though Karinna had firmly denied my thinking last night, I couldn't help thinking about the 'meeting' and just exactly what - or who - I thought I had seen. I knew what I had seen. Why would my mind bring me those names if I wasn't sure that it was them? And yet, at the same time, I trusted Karinna's judgement enough to know that Julien probably wasn't the person stalking around in the woods at night, hunting unicorns and sneaking into ladies' bedchambers.

Was it all an act, though? What if his perfectly suave and rational façade just disguised something else?

No. That was utter lunacy, and that made me think that perhaps the group wasn't behind the smaller crimes that had been occurring over the castle and just some other organization that loyal and compassionate nobles took part in.

At least that was what I so desperately hoped.

And this revelation meant that I had another secret society to track down as well as identifying the perpetrator of the murders, although I hoped Karinna would be able to help on this front with whatever she was able to find in the library stacks. It also meant that I had a conversation starter to broach with Julien if I could work up the courage.

I turned the corner, pulling the sleeves of my gown down. I had been deceived by the bright sunlight
into leaving my cloak inside my chamber and was now deeply regretting it as I looked out onto the training fields. I paused for a moment, allowing my eyes to scan across the groups of soldiers and nobles that were already milling around at such an early hour. I sincerely doubted that Caspian would be -

Oh.

That was a sight that I could certainly get used to. I was suddenly feeling an awful lot more awake.

Caspian was shirtless, as were some of the other soldiers as they gathered around for what I assumed was some kind of motivational talk. I scanned over their faces, in an attempt to keep my composure, and found no sign of Markus which was probably a good thing. He was undoubtedly still abed, the place were any self-respecting person should be so early in the morning.

But then, if I was still in bed I would have missed this.

It must be some bizarre kind of manly training technique so that they could adjust their bodies to the cold but whatever the thinking behind it, I approved whole-heartedly.

Caspian might not have been as bulky as some of the other soldiers - in fact some of them almost dwarfed him - but there was something about the way his golden skin seemed to glow, the way his strong shoulders rippled as he moved, the strength clear in his muscular arms and broad hands, that made me feel as though my throat was closing up. He had his back to me, his expanse of golden skin dotted with faint scars and his breeches settled a little lower on his hips than I thought was proper.

Oh, fuck. He was just so hot. It wasn't fair; I still had to go and speak to him and attempt to form coherent sentences while staring at his chest. I definitely wasn't the smallest woman at court but he had several inches on me, if I needed any other way to feel physically smaller and intimidated by him.

I hurriedly ran my fingers through my hair, pushing some stray curls behind my ears, and sighing determinedly. I had to do this; I wasn't going to let myself be controlled by one horrendously handsome man.

I forced myself to place one foot in front of the other, my ankles almost wobbling on the uneven ground. Up ahead, I could see the nobles laughing about something and Caspian ruefully smirking, the laughter suddenly increasing as one man murmured something.

"Your Majesty? Could I speak with you for a moment?" The laughter suddenly died as every eye shot towards me, Caspian turning startled and I forced myself not to look away from him.

"Lady Georgiana," He murmured, with an incline of his head, quickly blushing and stepping towards a rack of maces where all their shirts had been placed. I could feel myself flushing as the soldiers stared back at me, some of their eyes rather unsubtly trailing up and down my figure. Yes, I was aware that many of them viewed me as somewhat attractive. I wished that they didn't.

I could hear a handful of them murmuring to Caspian as he pulled his navy shirt over his head; I caught a handful of their words, something about my nervous figure and the way I wouldn't look any of them in the eyes. I immediately straightened up, flexing my hands as I caught the eye of the man closest to me. I recognised him for the many court events the pair of us had attended. I was fairly certain he was engaged now, however, and felt a pang of sympathy for his fiancée that he clearly didn't view her as enough for him.

"Everything alright, milady? What's wrong? Are we decent enough for you?" He grinned and I
swallowed, narrowing my eyes and raising my chin.

"At least I have the decency to not openly stare, Lord Golding. I believe Lady Cora would have something to say about your wandering eyes also." His smile immediately vanished, as though he hadn't expected me to open my mouth and combat his attack. A couple of soldiers started chuckling again, whether at my behavior or Golding's I wasn't sure, but it made my hands start to sweat regardless.

I had become so used to comments and gazes like these that I barely even acknowledged who they were coming from anymore; I didn't count the comments as a mark on anyone's character because they were so ingrained into the life that I had experienced. I had grown accustomed to the fact that they, men, would undervalue me and underestimate me and stare openly at me. Nothing that I said seemed to ever have an affect and sometimes I didn't want to say anything - because it took more bravery and backbone to stand up to it than accept it.

Caspian turned towards me, sternly meeting eyes with Golding who promptly bowed and the nobles began to disperse slowly over the field.

"I'm sorry about them." My eyes shot away from the training field back towards Caspian, my brain slowly digesting his words. "I can talk to them later, about making you feel uncomfortable..." He had been able to tell that I was uncomfortable? Was I so obvious? So weak? So clearly fractured?

"I've got bigger things to worry about." I said with a brief smile, attempting to brush off the concerned frown on his face because, for some reason, I didn't want to seem like a problem for him to deal with. I wanted to be strong and confident and intelligent - not an issue or fragile or vulnerable.

"We've found out some more information." Caspian's eyes darted around us, as though checking for anyone who might be listening, before resting back on my face. I swallowed.

"Go on - "

"We think the killer is looking to complete a ritual and each of the victims represents, or will represent, one of the four elements. Karinna's doing some more research now but - "

"They're not random?" I shook my head, watching the confusion grow on his face.

"No. We think the victims are being specifically targeted for their characteristics."

"Is that worse or better?" Caspian said dryly, a question that I had been considering myself. "So the killer knows who they're going after - "

"They're causing chaos as a result and they must have known that this would be a consequence of their actions, but I don't think that is their main goal."

"The goal is whatever result the ritual brings." Caspian said slowly and I nodded, folding my arms in an attempt to conserve some body heat - as though I needed anything else to feel weak about, seeing as Caspian had been prepared to start training without a shirt.

"There must be something significant about now, though." I continued, hoping I wasn't so obviously showing how cold I was feeling. "Maybe it's someone who doesn't want the alliance between ourselves and the Lakosians to go ahead, someone with some deep rooted hatred - "

"Of me." Caspian said bluntly, sighing and biting his lip. I forced myself not to stare. His lips were - "Great."

"Of all Narnians," I said quickly, focusing my mind on the matter at hand and attempting to calm the
blush that I felt sure was rising on my cheeks. "Not just you."

"That's worse." Caspian said, drifting his eyes across the training field and over the groups of soldiers who were currently hacking at each other with swords.

Did I tell him about the meeting that I had walked into and the people that I had seen? Did I dare suggest that some members of his court might be turning against him, if my theories were incorrect?

No. I wasn't quite sure what that information would do, certainly if the information was incorrect and I didn't want to be spreading empty rumours.

"Do you have any idea who the killer might be?" I sighed.

"I don't know. The most obvious choice would be an Lakosian who doesn't particularly like you."

He was staring off somewhere to the right of me, his eyes slightly glazed over as though he was trapped deep into his thoughts. Something about the concept of telling him the flaws that people perceived he had to his face made my hands sweat more than they already were. But I didn't think there was any way that I could convey this without being truthfully honest. "Maybe they think he's too young, naïve, too idealistic - idealism isn't a bad thing in my eyes but some people might see it that way. You're a different type of leader to Estella and some people might have a problem with that."

"Thank you."

There was a moment of silence as his eyes met mine, a brief, somewhat strained smile crossing his face. He looked as though he wanted to say something, words hovering on the tip of his tongue as suddenly the cheers of training soldiers increased all around us. One way that I would always be very different to Markus was that I would never find swinging a sword around my head to be entertaining. It might be needed sometimes, but I would never find it enjoyable.

"So, you can fight - " Caspian said suddenly, his mind clearly following the same tangent as my own. "I saw you when Markus was - " Oh yes. That entertaining time.

"Our parents made sure that Markus and I had lessons." I said, finding myself smart to smile slightly at the mention of my parents.

"I'll try not to make you angry." He said with a grin.

"I wouldn't advise it." Why did his smile make me feel so weak? What was it about the way his eyes glimmered and the plumpness of his lips and -

"Archery."

"I'm sorry?"

"A little practice." He said, suddenly straightening up and gesturing behind me where I knew the targets were already set up. "Something to shut those incorrigible nobles up." I immediately felt my posture stiffen as Caspian raised an eyebrow at me, waiting for my response. I knew what he was trying to do with the hopeful look on his face at his clever idea that he thought would make me feel better.

I shook my head, immediately noting how his face seemed to crumple slightly. "They'll just presume it was a fluke." I said. "Or that you made it easier for me. I know what will happen, it's happened before. I don't need to spend my time trying to convince people of my worth. I shouldn't need to."
I quickly curtsied and hurried away from him, keeping my gaze down. I didn't want to think about the confused look that had graced his face, the one that I would undoubtedly have to try and explain to him the next time that we conversed.

I felt as though every inch of my skin was itching and burning as I walked away, the feeling of shame and embarrassment that I had first felt when Golding had spoke to me re-emerging over my skin. Could Caspian not understand what I was feeling?

But, then again, how could I expect him to understand when I made a conscious effort to avoid him whenever I could? How could I expect him to understand the shame that I tackled every day and the uselessness that had been growing inside of me ever since I was a child.

How could I explain the way that I felt without completely breaking down in front of him?

- There's some parts of Georgie's past that no one in her life knows about.
Chapter 44

Lord Julien Cavendish, Marquis of Irvington

I was so damn hungry. That was the only thing I could think about. I just wanted this forsaken council meeting to be over so that I could immediately head for the banquet hall and eat my weight in potatoes and salted meat and whatever else had been arranged for lunch.

I didn't even know who had called this meeting as I adjusted my feet slightly, looking down at the tiled floor. Caspian was clearly trying to assume control of the situation but I had been with him when the meeting had been announced and seen the shock on his face. Queen Estella seemed to be in a very confident - gloating - sort of mood from where she was holding her court in around the corner of the table, so, plausibly, she could have arranged this. Then again, there was every chance that it was my mother who had arranged the whole thing because she seemed insistent on biting anyone's head off who disagreed with her.

All in all, as I surveyed the chaos that was growing around the table and the ever increasing volume of conversation, the council meeting was a mess. And it hadn't even officially started yet.

Caspian was attempting to keep some degree of order in his polite, mild-mannered way, but that plan seemed to have finally been rejected by him as the diplomatic smile slipped from his face and he turned to look at me. I could see the strained lines forming on his forehead and his thin-lipped smile, the stress evident on his face. I wasn't aware of anyone who wasn't feeling particularly strained and tense because of the events of the last few days.

Caspian had explained to me what Georgiana and Karinna's latest theory was and while at first I had been confused as to why he had seemed so grim when recounting their conversation rather than his typically charming and endearing persona, I could understand the logic behind her belief and it genuinely scared me. Whatever the result of ritual was, all I could think was that it must have serious worth if the perpetrator was willing to kill to attain it.

Everyone was being completely consumed by fear and panic and these small slivers of reasoning and explanation were helping me to retain grounded and not completely lose my rationality. At least, that was what I told myself in an environment were everyone around me was panicking for their own safety and were taking that out on those around them, hence the growing fractions between people. At least that was my idea.

"Should I tell them that the killings aren't random?" Caspian slid up beside me and I turned to look at him, attempting to push the noise behind me. It seemed that mass panic made people very talkative. "It might calm the situation?"

"No. That's a terrible idea." Caspian rolled his eyes and glared slightly at me. I smiled back, gripping my hands in front of me. "A terrible idea that was born out of a dire situation, but still. The killer might be in this room and telling them that we know what they're doing would not be helpful. If anything, it would give them the opportunity to get away."

"If they get away then they can't kill anymore people." Caspian said with a sigh, his tone bleak.

"They also can't be brought to justice." I reminded him, knowing that I was in a privileged position to be able to think like that. I could think my own thoughts, without being influenced by anything else.
I didn't have to bear the immense amount of pressure that Caspian did in trying to please everyone around him and help solve everyone's problems. I was able to think slightly strategically and diplomatically because I didn't have the stress of everyone hanging onto my every word. I was able to think, I automatically wants to say like my mother but she was currently destroying any Lakosian lord who dared interrupt her which definitely wasn't what I was doing. Despite what I said about her sometimes being far too forward than I would be ever be, the way she took control of every room she entered was empowering for me.

"You just need to keep calm; you're the one that is in control." I said and Caspian rolled his eyes again.

"Really? Because it doesn't feel like that."

"We're so close to figuring out what's going on and what this psycho's motives are. We can't give up now."

"We're so close?" Caspian raised an eyebrow.

"Fine so we, including Lady Georgiana and Karinna are. We just need to take our time and not make any rash decisions or jump to conclusions. We need to remain calm; we need people to think that everything's going to carry on as normal and that way the killer won't get spooked and disappear." I paused for a moment, surveying the room. "You need to pretend that you don't know anything about what's going on, which is something that you've always been good at."

"You're hilarious." Caspian said dryly, a smirk forming on his face and I attempted to hide my grin by staring down at my boots. "I'm not to used to hearing all these mighty quips during tense and highly professional situations. That's usually more my forte because I'm awkward most of the time and like to pretend that I'm not."

"I thought you might appreciate the distraction right now." I said, meeting his eye for a moment as he fidgeted with his hands. I knew that many people perceived Caspian to be a charismatic, confident leader and while he could fulfill this persona when he was stood at the foot of his throne with a entire room of watchful subjects blinking back at him, I knew the real Caspian - the man who rehearsed his court speeches more than a dozen times before delivering them; the man who would prefer to spend his days in the library or on the decks of one of his fleet, as opposed to sitting through meeting after meeting; the man who could turn into a nervous, shy school-boy whenever a lady so much as met his eye.

He deserved to be able to fool around for a split second every once in a while. I barely understood how he was able to keep his head together and retain the smile on his face.

"I hope that he's going to be paying Lady Karinna and Lady Georgiana after this." I continued, gazing up at the clock and wondering just how much longer we were going to leave the rest of the assembly to fight among themselves. "They are, theoretically, catching a serial killer for you."

"If they do manage to assist us in locating the person responsible then I'll give them more than just money, you don't have to worry about that." I let out a sudden gasp, watching Caspian frown in my direction.

"You're going to propose to Georgiana!" I whispered with a grin, glad that my mother was preoccupied with digging her nails deeply into the wood of the table and convincing a Lakosian noble just why his point of view was so wrong as Caspian leaned over and kicked me gently in the shin.
"Shut up." He said bluntly, keeping his eyes pinned on his assembly but that didn't mean I ignored the edges of his mouth curving into a smirk.

"Yes, your majesty." I said in my most diplomatic tone, re-clasping my hands behind my back in the assumed position for any dignitary.

"If I could have your attention please - " Caspian started, his voice clear and authoritative among the current uproar. This was his attempt to regain order for the third time in fifteen minutes and it wasn't for his lack of conviction or feeble vocal command. There were clearly many different ideas and opinions related to the recent incidents and everyone was eager to make theirs heard, as well as prove their peers wrong. There was no way to become an important diplomat or head of state unless you were willing to push and promote your ideals.

And one of the people who were pushing and promoting their ideals could very well be the killer that we were so fiercely searching for. I was under no illusions of that fact, hence why I thought it was so important for Caspian to keep the information that he shared with those around him to a minimum. I knew that keeping his subjects in the dark about what was happening was not easy feat for him but I felt sure that it was the most logical and safest approach at the moment.

"Thank you all for attending this morning and giving your time to this important issue." Caspian started, stepping forward to adjust the papers he had prepared in the small number of minutes he had been given. I listened carefully to his words as I scanned over every face that was staring back at him, assessing just what I knew about that individual and whether that would give me any reason to suspect them.

The majority of the faces staring back were individuals that I had grown up with, nobles that my father had worked closely alongside with and that I had spent many dinners sat beside. It was impossible to consider any of the people I had spent so many hours with to be capable of murder. "And I should think - "

My eyes instantly widened as the doors to the council chamber flew open, revealing Captain Sternwood. He was dressed in his usual smart leathers and cape but it was his expression that instantly captured my attention as he stormed over towards Caspian and the room was consumed by quiet whispers.

Just when we'd got them to be bloody quiet too...

There was something fragile and worrisome in his stern, somber face that was synonymous - at least in my mind - with reason, fact and unyielding loyalty. That was what I had come to know him as and the slight look of terror behind his eyes as he frantically murmured something to Caspian filled me with dread.

Something had happened. Something bad.

Sternwood was even more obsessed with protocol than my mother and I knew that there was absolutely no way he would have burst into a private council meeting, not even apologise and immediately start whispering with the King. I was beginning to feel slightly queasy, the gnawing hunger in my stomach replaced with something else.

Caspian adjusted his feet slightly so that I was directly in his eyesight. He looked frantic, angry and yet there was also something of intense dread in his expression. He mouthed a single word to me and I understood him instantly; it was a skill we had had many years to perfect from pleading with each other from across the room as tedious scholars preached to us about topics we had no interest in.
Fire.

The fourth element. The final element needed for the ritual and, as until five minutes ago, the one that
had been missing.

I now understood the panic that was quickly growing in Caspian's face. That was all four victims
found and all four elements served. So what the hell happened now?
Chapter 45

Lady Georgiana Howard

- This chapter contains a sexual assault so please take care reading if that's something that will affect you. I'm always around if you need to talk to somebody and please seek help and support if you need to. xx

I knew that it could only be a matter of time and yet I never could have predicted that the news would break quite so soon; another body had been found around noon that belonged to a blacksmith who worked in the town center. A blacksmith - fire. The connection was simple. The element that had been missing for the ritual had now been found.

I had no clue what was going to happen next. And that terrified me.

What if we were wrong in our assumptions? What if we were leading the King and his soldiers onto a wild goose chase that resulted in more deaths, rather than less? I would never be able to meet his eye again bearing the knowledge of what I had done. Currently, I was wondering how I would be able to do this given our exchange on the training fields; I couldn't imagine a situation in which our conversations could become even more infrequent or strained. And yet it was wholly possible.

The ritual had been completed and I was still clueless to what happened now.

After returning from the training fields, I had found myself cornered by Lucille who I felt sure had been waiting for me to return because it felt far too convenient for her to suddenly appear in the same corridor that I re-entered the castle by.

And of course she had been waiting for me - there was no way she would brave the freezing temperatures with the knowledge that I would have to return at some point and a clear vantage point from which to survey me.

I had found myself telling her about the secret group that Karinna and I had discovered, my mind still reeling from the information regarding the blacksmith. Her interest and surprise had seemed genuine, disputing my belief that she could have possibly already known about this particular group. She knew practically every single conversation and exchange that took place in the castle and so it wasn't out of the question for her to already be aware of this too. She had enough eyes looking out for her, anyway.

Now that I had disclosed this piece of information it meant that, using her resources, we could now focus on locating another secretive group that would have more to gain from petty crimes that were on the way to causing mass hysteria. Lucille agreed with me that the chances of Julien and Sternwood being involved in a crime against the King were slim, but not exactly impossible. I didn't know what Lucille's relationship was with Sternwood, or the past that they shared, only that she seemed adamant that people could change in a heartbeat, if given the opportunity.

Her response had made me slightly uneasy; I rarely knew all the information that Lucille did and she had a way of speaking that made me feel as though I was lagging four steps behind her, in terms of what we knew. I had to remind myself that this was just her way.

I wanted to tell Markus too about what I had discovered about the secret society because the guilt was beginning to eat away inside of me like a parasite and I knew that the simple solution was just to tell him what I had found. I couldn't quite explain my guilt - something about not keeping secrets
with him and that, in troubling times like these, who was I to keep details from him that could potentially save his life if the situation called for it?

I already knew that he wasn't on the training fields, which was usually the first place that I turned to search for him. He could possibly be helping the soldiers to maintain order in the town, something that he often did for no other reason that it encouraged people to perceive him - and therefore us - positively. News of the blacksmith's death had travelled rapidly, as I had known it would, and people had begun to manifest their panic physically, increasing the chances of them taking it out on their fellow citizens.

I, on the other hand, had to keep forcing myself to keep busy so that I simply didn't have time to panic. That was until I curled up into bed at night and found myself utterly unable to sleep.

As I somewhat cautiously made my way through the castle corridors, I was aware that locating Markus was taking far longer than I had anticipated and longer than I wanted to be spending aimlessly roaming. I needed to return to the library where Karinna was still pouring over books; the quicker that we found out what the result of the ritual would be, then the more time we would have to put a stop to it.

At least that was what I was hoping. Karinna had already told me that all the writings she had been able to find regarding the ritual were vague and she wasn't sure if there even would be any account of what specifically the ritual resulted in - it would be assumed that those searching for it would already know the answer.

I found myself in a dark corridor, the windows partially blocked by the bare trees that were brushing up against them and casting long shadows across the ground. Not unlike myself, Markus would also sometimes disappear on a walk around the castle and his path would often be sporadic and difficult to trace. I would have to hope I found him soon or else abandon my search.

My heart lurched as I heard footsteps up ahead, my breath faltering as I caught sight of Caspian's shadowy figure pushing past a velvet hanging that was supposedly to keep servants away from the King's private quarters. I felt my throat dry up as he moved closer, his boots almost threateningly clattering on the ground. He was staring straight ahead but it was as though he didn't see me, his eyes a little unfocused. I presumed he was thinking about something...

Me. Was he thinking about me? Was he thinking about our conversation this morning? Had he been able to detect how uncomfortable and vulnerable I had been feeling? He must have been able to; he was by no means as naïve and childlike as some other nobles tried to depict him as.

That was obvious, though, to anyone who possessed a pair of eyes. His tall, imposing frame didn't belong to a child, nor did the muscles straining through his silk shirts or the smooth timbre of his voice that ignited something powerful and uncontrollable inside of me.

I gasped as a shadow suddenly fell over me, lifting my gaze to see Caspian staring down on me, his mouth pulled into a sly smirk and his almost-blank eyes glinting in the dim light like jewels. I felt as though I couldn't breathe, all of my senses completely overwhelmed by the closeness of his body, the heat of his skin that I could gently feel radiating into mine, the intoxicating smell of his cologne and his skin mixing into one and -

My back roughly hit the cool stone wall but I didn't dwell on the dull pain that ricocheted through my spine as Caspian surged forwards into the alcove he'd pushed me into, concealing the pair of us from the gazes of passers-by. I didn't care if anyone saw me, all I cared about was the calluses of Caspian's palms as he cupped my face, his kisses consuming my mouth as I lost myself in his touch and his scent coating my skin. His hands. His mouth. His breath that warmed my face as he pulled my body
flush against his, one hand squeezing my hips as the other held my jaw.

Nothing else mattered. I couldn't think of anything else that didn't involve his name or his body or -

I broke away from him for a moment, gasping for breath so desperately that my lungs were beginning to burn. Caspian turned towards my neck, nipping the sensitive skin as he slobbered more of his intoxicating kisses down to my collar bone. I felt like I was drowning in his heat and his touch as I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, desperate to feel closer, to feel more.

I didn't care about the sting of his teeth against my skin, the tightness of his grip as he forced my head to turn in order to get better access to my neck. My entire body felt as though it was burning from the inside out, as though my blood had been replaced with fire and was scorching through the very essence of my skeleton. I needed more of his fire, his roughness, the pain that throbbed through my body with every breath that I forced through my lungs.

His hands slipped down from my jaw to my shoulders, slowly, torturously slowly, making their way down my body, his thumbs brushing over my sensitive nipples as he took my breasts in his large palms, squeezing them tightly and forcing a moan from my throat. I was going to explode. I couldn't contain this much passion, this much hunger and frenzied feeling. His hands slid down to my hips as I reached forwards and grabbed his face, forcing his hot lips back onto my own.

Yes. Yes, I wanted this. I needed this so damn badly.

Him. Just him. My world was him. I was him.

His left hand slipped lower, his right remaining on my hip, as it bunched up into the heavy fabric of my forest-green gown and began to pull, revealing my ankle, my calf, my knee. I gasped as the cool air stroked my skin, deliciously contrasting with the heat of his mouth that he was pressing painfully hard against my neck.

I curled my leg around his body, pulling him closer, and could have sworn I heard a growl rip from his throat as he pulled away, his dark eyes locking with my own. I had always loved his eyes - dark and delicious and sinful as he reached down for my other leg, pulling the fabric up in one swift movement and forcing my knee to lock around his waist. He gripped onto my hips, his body weight pushing me into the wall as my legs tightened around his torso. I could feel every inch of him beneath me, every ripple of muscle, all soft, tender skin and hard, brutal bone as he forced me more tightly into the wall, his hands burning through my dress onto my skin.

My entire body was tingling; I could no longer tell where his hands were stroking and caressing and squeezing because every inch of my form felt as though he was doing all of those things all at once. He was suffocating me, his mouth trailing hot kisses across every inch of my exposed skin, his torso pressing me into the wall so tightly I was struggling to breathe.

I let my head loll back against the wall as he continued his torture, a moan escaping my open lips as my eyes hazily gazed over a figure stood at the other end of the corridor. Her porcelain skin was cloaked in darkness, her eyes sparkling as they locked onto my own and stared deep into my soul. There was a smirk on her ruby red lips, her curtain of dark hair thrown over her shoulder. She looked like a bewitching, depraved goddess and something that my mind had conjured in a moment of madness and fantasy.

And yet there was something in Estella's eyes that made my vision suddenly become clearer, made the burning feeling soften inside my veins, made the intoxicating feel of Caspian's grinding against me feel a little more...undesirable.
What was I doing? My head was beginning to spin. I couldn't breathe.

If Caspian detected the stiffness in my form, he didn't care. His mouth was still kissing along my neck, his torso pushing against me even more tightly as his hands reached for my dress which was bunched around my knees and began to lift higher revealing more of my kneecaps, the tender skin of my thighs and gripped onto them, his fingers digging harshly into my supple flesh, and groaned.

No. Stop. I -

"Caspian -" I breathed, trying to lift my arms from where they were pressed against my body to push him away but they were locked into place. His fingers continued squeezing the tops of my thighs, the darkness in his eyes seemingly endless as I tried to force his mouth away from my skin. "Caspian, stop."

If anything, his eyes seemed to darken, the ravenous look on his face intensify as he reached up to claim my breasts again, tugging at my neckline to reveal more of my cleavage. I could feel the panic boiling in my stomach as I struggled in his grip, attempting to push him away from where he was attempting to yank open the front of my dress. revulsion flooding through me. He didn't seem to feel my panic, my unease, my plain discomfort at his actions, in fact this seemed to encourage him with his breathing growing heavier and his grip growing tighter.

I could feel the weight of him pushing hard against the apex of my thighs, his desire obvious. He wouldn't be gentle, would he? No, he would be brutal and unyielding in his search for the release he was so fervently searching for, with no care for how every muscle inside my body was beginning to tense in preparation for what it thought was coming, its attempts to protect itself incompatible with his desire.

I knew who would win and it would never be me, no matter how hard I tried to clench my thighs closed and dig my fingernails into my palms to mask the pain.

"Please." I begged again, my voice turning soft as he grinded against me, his mouth kissing across the top of my breasts. "Caspian, stop - "

He might as well have not have heard me. He might not have, his desire overwhelming even his most base sense. It was as though I was simply a hunk of meat for him to claw at and use; as though he was simply claiming his right to dominate and take what he desired from me.

As though it was simply my duty to submit to him, be owned by him, and accept my position as nothing more than a source of pleasure for him.

"This isn't you." I murmured, writhing in his grip in an attempt to loosen his grip on my body but, if anything, it seemed to tighten again. "This isn't you, Caspian." He ignored my words, his face remaining frenzied and determined, as he reached down for the laces of his breeches and began to untie them.

I was going to be sick. No. This wasn't happening. Not here, not again -

I took advantage of this moment of weakness from him in order to wrench my right arm from where it was pinned to my body and slapped him harshly across the face, watching his expression grow into a snarl as he grabbed hold of my arms and pulled them above my head, pinning them against the wall at my wrists.

"This isn't you." I repeated, my voice a panicked whisper as I bucked against him, almost recoiling as he leaned forwards and started slobbering thick, possessive kisses across my cheek, his fingers
digging painfully into my skin. I could feel the tears forming in my eyes as my mind began to slowly shut down. I bucked against him again, trying to pull my arms away but his grip was unyielding. Every time I fought against him, he seemed to grow more intoxicated, more intent on grinding against me and kneading the sensitive skin of my thighs. "You don't want to do this. I know you don't."

He forced his lips onto my own, claiming them into a deep kiss as the hand that wasn't pinning my wrists into the wall slipped down towards my center.

The tears were flowing down my face now as I thrashed against him, using every ounce of energy that I could muster to throw against him. But it was no use.

"Please, Caspian, stop. Please. Please..." I begged, my voice a pitiful whine as the tears clogged my throat. I was struggling to breathe, the panic consuming my body and shutting down my bodily functions as it continued to try and protect itself. He paused for a moment, his splayed hand pressing heavily into my navel as his eyes slid up to my face. "Please..."

He leaned forwards to claim my mouth again but before his lips could meet mine he paused. I waited, gasping for air as I took advantage of his moment of stillness. He drew back slightly, his eyes scanning over my arms that were still pinned above my head and the tears staining my face and a look of confusion passed over him. He released my arms and I struggled to pull my legs away from his torso without collapsing onto the floor. He didn't move to help me - he seemed to be in complete shock as to what he was doing and the way I seemed so utterly defeated.

I gave myself another moment to steady my breathing, to calm my racing heartbeat that was pounding so quickly my chest was hurting. I looked out into the corridor where Estella had been stood mere moments before. She was gone. Her and her deep soulless eyes had vanished into thin air.

Caspian didn't speak as he pulled his hands away from my hips, his breathing as erratic as my own and his eyes wide. I couldn't meet his gaze, couldn't let him look into my watery eyes and see the tears that were still rolling down my cheeks because of him.

I moved past him, contorting my body so that I didn't have to brush up against him. He let me walk away, the shame and embarrassment causing my entire body to flush as I hurried down the corridor, wiping the tears from my face and attempting to salvage the small tears in the neckline of my gown as I gently pulled it back over the tops of my breasts.

I didn't turn back as I continued down the corridor, no idea as to where I was heading just as long as I could escape that corridor and be alone.

My body, coiled tight like a spring, slowly began to relax as I forced air through my lungs and stepped into the faint sunlight shining through a nearby window.

What had that been? I didn't have any words. I had nothing.

If I had wanted proof of Estella possessing the mind-control powers the Lakosians were so famed for then that was the best and most convincing proof I was ever going to attain. Her powers were so strong, so utterly dominating that she could completely remove someone's personality and morals from their body and mind. Caspian had been intent on raping me.

Or rather Caspian hadn't, Estella had.

How could I possibly use my so-called evidence now? How could I possibly stand up in front of
Caspian, the council, the court and explain what had happened?

Why would Estella attempt something like this? Why would she target me? If Estella had wanted to completely break me, to remove me from her path then why had she controlled me too, at least partially? Why not force Caspian to do it while I was completely aware of everything he was doing, when I wasn't clouded by my own lust?

I stared down at my shaking hands, the pale veins underneath my skin. Estella had wanted to scare me, show that I could be controlled and the limits of her power extended far beyond me.

Estella wasn't just a controversial leader, I realised, as tears began to fall from my eyes again. She was terrifying.

I needed to go back to my chamber, somewhere that I didn't need to worry about being stared at or questioned or gossiped about. I willed my feet to move as quickly as possible, my throat still clogged. I could still feel his hands on my skin, his body suffocating me, that crazed, frantic look in his eyes.

What would Caspian have done if Estella hadn't released him? Would Caspian have been able to push through her powers? Or would he simply have continued, using me like the rag-doll Estella was creating me to be?

I repeated one phrase over and over again inside my head as I stormed down the corridors, ignoring every noble and servant that I passed on the way to my chamber: that wasn't Caspian, it had been Estella. Not Caspian but Estella. Not Caspian but Estella. Not Caspian but Estella.

And yet it was Caspian's hands that were still roaming my skin, his mouth claiming mine.
I furiously rubbed my hands together as I walked, desperately trying to warm my palms and re-establish any kind of sensation in my fingers. It had only been a ten minute walk from the castle to deliver the King's correspondents to the messengers who would deliver those letters across the country - I did not envy them at this moment in time - and yet my hands had already begun to freeze up.

Nevertheless, I had plenty to occupy my mind and distract myself from the cold. I had passed by the tavern, taking a short-cut that I knew back to the castle, and was fairly certain I had seen General Sternwood sat inside and nursing a pint of something when it was barely past lunchtime. Perhaps the assumption that he spent his every waking moment working wasn't strictly true?

Regardless of Sternwood's private life, I really did have other, and more important, things to be considering. Like, for example, how the blacksmith had been found in his forge stabbed to death with the furnace still burning. Everyone in the whole town - arguably, everyone in the city - had known him and that, at least in my opinion, was not helping to subdue matters. Everyone felt as though they had the right to be speculating about the perpetrator of the crimes now and who could possibly be behind the attacks, but that just bred more unease and fear, emotions that were already bubbling over.

People were already at each others throats because of this and it wasn't just the nobles fighting over Narnian and Lakosian lines, villagers were beginning to turn on their neighbors as tensions rose and the blacksmith's death was sure to push things over the edge. I felt sure that one wrong move from anybody whether it be the King, a lord or a farmer would send everything resembling order and solidarity up into flames. I knew it. I could feel it as I walked through the town, minding not meet anyone's eye for too long in case this became a suitable enough excuse to start a fight with me.

I knew it and there was nothing I could do about it.

I had considered taking my lunch in the market square, warming myself outside the baker's, but I didn't think I could bare the tension. I was also going to head for the shops and stalls and find some Yule presents for my parents but I couldn't relax among the steely silences, the sharp, angered tones of vendors, the pressure that he could feel building all around me as though there was a storm coming.

There was a storm coming - but it was nothing to do with the weather.

I re-entered the castle, instantly glad to have a shelter against the wind and sleet, even if the wind still managed to worm its way through the gaps in the brick. I still had time before I had to return to my duties - I had eaten my sandwich whilst walking to deliver the King's messages so that I didn't have to bear the unease of the town - and I decided that I might as well try and work off some of the stress and anxiety that had been steadily building inside of me all morning, as a direct result of the atmosphere that was building within the castle and outside its walls.

It wasn't as though walking inside the castle was any calmer than walking in the market, though. I would argue that tensions were in fact higher because it was the nobles and individuals inside the castle whose actions, or lack of, would directly affect everything else. If they did - or didn't - find the killer then tensions could only increase for so long until they cracked.
I started walking, no clear destination in mind but rather hoping that the simple motion might be
some sort of outlet for my stress. I felt sure that the perpetrator had to be a jealous, vengeful Lakosian
who was holding a long-standing grudge and was eager to incite some chaos. It had to be. No
Narnian would voluntarily slaughter their own people. I felt sure of that.

I felt less certain in regards to the smaller, more random acts that had been occurring and had no real
cue to the perpetrator's identity. It could be a Narnian, I reasoned, though I would have no idea
where to start in naming suspects.

Perhaps Lady Swifton had just been ill? And ice does crack, what if that had just been an unfortunate
accident? A truly unfortunate accident for the girl Georgiana had had to rescue and one that would
probably scar her for years but perhaps still an accident?

One incident that was clearly no accident was what had happened with Georgiana and the unicorn.
That had no rational explanation and in no mindset could that simply be regarded as a random
occurrence. There was no unexplainable error that had resulted in the skull of a butchered unicorn
being tied to Georgiana's bedpost. Someone was responsible for that, someone with a warped and
disturbed mind, but someone nevertheless. That was probably a Narnian because I'd heard other
servants gossiping about how they didn't have unicorns in Lakosia and they would have no clue how
to track one.

If I had to bet on it, I would put it down to a group of drunk, irresponsible, overly-masculine nobles
who thought it was a hilarious idea at the time because they wanted to sleep with Georgiana and it
made them feel clever and boosted their egos.

I turned the corner, bumping into a passing servant as I did so. There were countless nobles that
could be responsible - there were certainly enough who were arrogant and domineering in regards to
women and who thought that Georgiana was attractive enough that they'd like to...well, have her. I
tended not to listen to these drunken conversations anymore, as nobles would drone on about how
appealing they found each part of a woman's body. I had other priorities.

I caught a flash of red hair further down the corridor and, upon realizing that I'd stepped into one of
the main corridors that was used by the servants, saw Lysa approaching me, a basket of washing
clutched in her hands. As a result of all the Lakosians that were staying in the castle, many of the
servants had been dumped with double the work. I was lucky enough to be exempt to this - my role
as the King's personal manservant special and privileged enough to mean I had to be available to him
at all times.

"Have you heard about the blacksmith?" I asked as she approached, watching her smile of greeting
slide from her face. I hadn't meant to greet her with this, but I was struggling to be able to think of
anything else.

"Yes. It's awful. He was lovely." She replied bleakly.

"The market's in uproar." I said bitterly.

"Has there been any fights?"

"Only a few scuffles as of yet." I said. "But it won't be long until something erupts. All because of
these damned Lakosians -"

"What?" Lysa asked, her eyes narrowing.

"It must be one of them whose the killer." I explained, folding my arms as Lysa moved closer to the
wall to let another servant pass.

"We haven't got any proof of that." Lysa said gently. "It could just as easily be a Narnian. Or both - "

"What do you mean both?" I said, wincing slightly at the sharpness of my tone. I saw Lysa straighten up, balancing the washing basket on her hip. "All the Lakosians hate us."

"The King doesn't. You said yourself that he was getting pretty close with her."

"That as him just being diplomatic. He's supposed to flirt with her a little and make her feel comfortable - "

"Have you even watched the King? He's so nervous around women sometimes that he can hardly look at them." Yes, this was true sometimes but once he psyched himself up a little - or drank a little wine - he was fine. It was amusing, really, and I'd told him many a time that most women found it to be endearing. I didn't know whether he had believed me or not.

"That's hardly - "

"Anyway, I saw Queen Estella and Her Grace talking." Lysa interrupted and I frowned slightly, the tension crackling between us. She didn't need to explain who she meant by Her Grace, Hestia Cavendish was the only woman in court to warrant a title such as that. "Are they allowed to talk with no guards present and no extra security in a corridor that is miles away from Her Majesty's chambers and yet strangely close to the King's?"

"What are you suggesting?" There was no way that the Lakosians and the Narnians could be working together to accomplish something like this. It was absurd and completely went against all the pre-existing history between the two nations. Lysa clearly didn't understand this.

"What of they're in it together?" Lysa continued as I swallowed, my throat dry like sand-paper. "They want to cause chaos and have the King replaced by Estella or some other powerful Narnian noble. Or, they want the King off the throne and then they can take over together - "

"Why the hell would Hestia do that?" I barked, watching a handful of surprised servants look over at our conversation. Something was weighing down on my mind, sitting heavy in my stomach, something that made me feel jittery and bitter and sharp like glass. I watched Lysa cock her head to the side.

"Well, it's better than your theory which goes off no real evidence."

"It's fact."

"What's fact?" Lysa asked, pulling away from me slightly.

"That all Lakosians have a bloodlust tendency - "

"And what about the girl Georgie saved? She wasn't a killing machine. She was innocent, just like all the Lakosians are until proven with evidence. And even if some are violent, the ones everyone is so busy telling stories about, you're just lumping them all together because he wants someone to blame for what's going on because, as much as you'll never admit it, you're scared and confused."

"I'm not - " I started, straightening up to my full height.

"Yes, you are. But instead of just admitting it, you're taking it out on other people because you don't want other people to see you as being 'weak'. You've assumed superiority over me because that's
what you feel you're worth because you're the King's servant. But you aren't any more than me, Tristan, we're equal. I'm just as scared but I don't have my own stubborn head up my ass - "

"Your theory's crazy." I spat, turning away from her. "You're deluded."

"And you're being cruel." Lysa called as I stalked down the corridor, barely seeing the people that passed in front of me. Stress and frustration was humming in my veins. How could Lysa not see my point of view? Not see the truth about the Lakosians?

But as I turned the corner and paused for the briefest of moments to see Lysa changing her path and returning the way she had first come, a sinking feeling settled in me that perhaps Lysa had been right.

- So Tristan can be a stubborn ass sometimes. He's not the only one...
I spent an unknown amount of time on my bed doing nothing else other than simply staring into space before I became restless and found that wandering the moderate length of my bedchamber wasn't sufficient, hence why I took to the castle corridors. If anyone noticed the red rings around my eyes or the disarray of my hair then they decided not to mention it which I supposed I should be grateful for.

I didn't know what to do. My mind was whirling with thoughts and complex emotions that were begging to be released and yet I didn't want to act on any of them. My mind was blank.

I didn't want to speak to anyone and, in fact, I was dreading the time when I would be forced to speak of what had occurred. I knew they probably wouldn't believe me - it would be my word against the word of the King - and my shame was effectively sealing my mouth closed. Any listener would undoubtedly claim that I had forced myself onto the King, rather than the opposite way round, and any mention of a supernatural force would be immediately quashed and replaced with my own loose morals.

Either that or the rhetoric would be that I was attempting to squander money out of the royal pocket by accusing the King of forcing himself onto me. Neither would leave me in a favorable light. Neither would expose the truth.

Estella possessed magical abilities; the rumours, to that extent at least, were frightfully true. Did the King now? He was the one who had spent the largest amounts of time with her recently, both officially and unofficially. I didn't care whether he felt anything for her other than diplomatic respect but I couldn't stand back and allow him to trust someone who used their abilities to force others to hurt their peers for their own gain.

Everything had become staggeringly clear inside my head. I had been overcomplicating and overthinking everything. It was simple. Estella was a bitch; she was a power-hungry, conniving piece of shit and she was terrifying.

Murder no longer seemed like a stretch for her.

But why would she feel the need to go to the trouble of murdering four people to complete a ritual when she had the raw power to do that? Pure spite? No matter how much I know despised her, I couldn't shake the feeling that she was as clever as she was scheming and wouldn't act without a firm motive behind those actions.

A flash of familiar blue resonated before my eyes, standing out among the wash of colour that blended together before my vision. I honed in on that blue, identifying the wearer of the blue gown as Karinna and suddenly a few of the sections inside my brain began to reconnect. I had no clue how long she had spent in the library - time had lost all meaning to me.

How did I speak to her? Did I admit what had happened? She headed immediately in my direction, my steps faltering. Her expression was neutral yet calm.

"I needed to stretch my legs for a little while," Karinna said on approaching me. "So far I've found nothing and it's killing me. But I suppose I'll just have to keep looking." Did I tell her that Estella had
magical abilities? Would that put her in more danger? "Georgie?"

"Hmm?" I realised that I was yet to make eye contact with her and had been staring into the space beyond her shoulder that rested at my eye level.

"Are you okay? You seem a little...dazed?"

"I'm fine." I said quickly, straightening my shoulders and swallowing. Inside, my stomach was quivering and I knew that I had to tell someone or I was going to shatter in a flurry of tears and frantic breathing. The corridor was mostly quiet, Karinna one of the only people I would dare to tell. I could trust her. "Estella has magic."

Every bone and fiber inside Karinna suddenly seemed to freeze and grow rigid as I spoke. Her clear eyes grew wider, boring into mine as though I was invisible and she was seeing straight through me. "What?"

"Queen Estella has magic." I repeated, lowering my voice a little as I clutched my hands in front of me, pushing them tightly into my stomach as though that pain would be able to drag me out of my overwhelmed daze.

"How do you know that?" She murmured, her brows furrowed slightly and her tone defiant. I had expected reserve and disbelief - I knew my words would hardly be easy to accept - but I hadn't expected Karinna to be obstinate in her response.

"Because I was stood there, her eyes glaring into my skull, as she forced Caspian to throw himself at me." I murmured, as strongly and confidently as I could because that was what had happened and all the while ignoring the sinking shameful feeling that was consuming me. "He pinned me against the wall and - " I couldn't speak the words. I couldn't describe the motions that were so clearly replaying inside my head. "I wanted him to do it at first - I think that was when she was controlling me because it was like my mind was overcome by this cloud and I couldn't see or think clearly. But then it faded, for me at least, and he just kept going and he wouldn't stop - "

Karinna's stare was blank, almost to the point where she hadn't heard my words. I could feel the panic rising inside of me, the heat and shame coating my skin and the frustration that she didn't seem to understand what I was telling her, that she didn't understand or acknowledge how I was feeling.

"Did you hear what I said?" I said, my restraint loosening as I gaped up at her, the steeliness in her expression making me want to cry all over again. She seemed speechless, her mind pre-occupied with something else, as the scene continued to replay before my eyes over and over again - the tightness of Caspian's grip, the way he'd groaned as he'd touched me, the tears that had clogged my throat making it difficult to breathe.

Could Karinna even see that I'd been crying? Could she even see the panic in my eyes and how close I was to falling over the edge?

I had never seen Karinna like this, so blank and so confused.

"Magic." Karinna whispered the word as though it were some mystical prophecy and I felt something inside of me crack. My eyes began to brim with tears and I could feel my hands shaking.

Magic. Because that was the one aspect of the conversation that Karinna had picked up on. Not that I had been assualted and controlled.

"Right. Magic." I breathed, casting my eyes off the side as I pressed my hands tighter against my stomach in an attempt to tighten my grip on reality.
"What?"

"Because that's clearly the important part of what I said - " I shrieked, my voice breaking as I blinked back the tears. My hands were slick with sweat, my stomach churning to the point where I was going to be sick. I took a step backwards, watching shock flash across Karinna's face as my gaze slipped to the floor.

Why had I bothered telling her? No one cared. Why would they care? It was just me. Pointless, worthless...

"Georgie, wait!" Karinna started as I turned down the corridor, shaking her hand off my shoulder in an attempt to hide my tears. A surge of anger shot through me.

"No, it's fine!" I insisted with a smile that must have seemed maniacal among my tears. "You're obsessed with your magic and your books and - "

"Because I'm the one who has spent the days looking into it while you've just been wandering around the castle talking with your aunt and the King and - "

"No one was forcing you to do it!" I shot back, her sharp tone surprising me. Despite her absent-mindedness, there was something almost bitter and hurt in her tone. "I thought you were happy to do it!" My own anger that was hurling back into Karinna's face was something that I hadn't expected yet, as I wiped my eyes on the back of my hand, looking up into Karinna's expression of frustration and hurt and confusion it was the only feeling I could rely on.

"How was I - "

"Maybe if you had said something and told me how you feel." I continued, my voice rising, the corridor now deserted. I didn't know why I felt so angry but the shock and shame that were yet to leave my body were amplifying my emotions. "But that's your problem. You don't say anything, you keep everything locked inside and make everyone guess - "

"I'm not the only one with that issue." Karinna replied and I paused for a split-second, her spiteful words reverberating around my skull. I blinked. I was numb. Numb to anything that wasn't frustration and confusion and -

"You don't protect your heart by pretending you don't have one." I spluttered, aware that I sounded deranged and my face was blotchy with tears. "You're not the only one who has lost people, who's been hurt." Karinna didn't speak for a moment, simply stared back at me, her pale-blue eyes seeming to grow even icier.

"You don't know me." She said bluntly, raising her chin to stare over me. I nodded.

"And who's fault is that?"

I didn't wait for an answer, I simply turned and started walking, wiping my tears and allowing a ferocious gust of wind to blow over me as I passed an open window, relishing in the cold and obsolete. My feet seemed to be hurrying, eager to escape to somewhere safer, the gurgling in my stomach only growing to the point where I thought I might vomit. Everything seemed blurry and cloudy, as though reality was slipping away from me, slipping through my fingers like water. I couldn't understand anything any more.

Estella has magic. That was the only thing I knew for certain.

"Lady Georgiana?" I opened my mouth, prepared to dismiss whichever servant or noble I had
staggered across but the words sharply died in my throat.

No. No. I couldn’t. I -

It was Caspian, his face pale and eyes painfully wide as he began to approach me. No. Anyone but him. I couldn’t do it -

"Georgiana, please, just let me - " I couldn’t meet his gaze as my movement stalled. What did he expect me to say to him? I quickly scanned his face as he fidgeted with the cuffs of his jacket. His eyes had now returned to their usual gorgeous warm brown shade, no trace of the darkness that had consumed them earlier.

I couldn’t do this. Every inch of my skin felt flushed and anxious and guilty -

The foyer that I had entered was mercifully deserted but that didn’t stop my eyes from running over every alcove, every curtain, every window. It took me a moment to realise what my subconscious was searching for. Estella, because I now expected her to be lingering wherever I stepped and watching over me like a hawk.

I was certain that Caspian noticed my wandering eyes and yet he didn’t comment on it, further adding to my feelings of guilt.

"I don’t know what happened." Caspian started, his voice painfully sincere. I did. Estella. She had happened. "But I’m eternally sorry. I’m never going to be able to fully apologise for my actions because I feel so ashamed but if there’s anything I can do to at least start to partially make it up to you and show just how - "

"Just stop." I said sharply, biting my lip and casting my eyes to his shoulder. His expression turned pained as my eyes watched him run his tongue over his top lip. I had to do this. "You need to ask the Lakosians to leave."

"What?" That was not what he had been expecting me to say and I knew it. I could address my feelings at a later date; right now, I needed to focus on pushing Estella as far away from here as possible. The results of her ritual could be catastrophic.

"You need to ask the Lakosians to leave." I repeated, solidly. "You need to ask Estella to leave." My voice tripped over her name but I continued on regardless. Caspian still looked pitifully confused.

"Why? What do you have against her?" Wait, what?

"It’s nothing to do with me. It’s to keep people safe." I stressed and Caspian sighed slightly. Did he not know what had happened between us? Was he not aware?

"I have so many people telling me how to act at the moment. I can’t listen to everyone, I can only listen to myself and I want through with their alliance. I want them here." He said, his voice firm, in a way that I hadn’t heard before.

"You don’t understand, does you?" I said, echoes of frustration seeping into my tone. "The longer the Lakosians - the longer Estella - is around the longer you’re at risk."

"Why me?" I had to restrain myself from sighing.

"Because you’re the person that she wants to kill!" Caspian’s eyes grew wide, his brows furrowing in something resembling confusion and frustration. I hadn’t planned on raising my voice quite so harshly but I had been unable to help myself. I cautiously analysed his expression - he truly didn’t
know that Estella had been his puppet master, did he? He thought his actions had been fully under his own control. And yet he was wrong, so dreadfully wrong.

Here was the arrogant prince bubbling under the surface that so many talked about. I couldn't blame him for his naivety towards the incident, it seemed that Estella had purposely wanted to make me aware of her control and yet chosen to keep him shrouded in the dark.

"I value you." Caspian started, in a blunt tone that made me aware there was more to this statement. If everyone really was beating down on him, he wasn't about to listen to my words. "But you are not the king. This is my business, not yours." I blinked up at him, allowing his words to settle in. He had not just spoken those words to me. Those words with such...overwhelming superiority. I knew that if Lucille had been around she would have had no qualms with slapping him in the face.

"You really can be an arrogant fool sometimes, can't you?" I said simply, looking up at him and resisting the urge to stroke his face. Caspian instantly raised an eyebrow.

"Excuse me? I'm trying to apologise and - "

"I'm sorry, I forgot who you were for a moment. I'm just Lady Georgiana who's rude and self-obsessed and seduces every man she sees, the one who might as well marry Dawson because he's got the money that I so clearly desire and at least then I can seduce as many men as I want while maintaining my financial security. After all, the only thing that I live for is the pleasure between my legs. Or am I suddenly mistake and that's not what everyone thinks of me?" I paused for a moment, raising an eyebrow and staring up into Caspian's stunned expression. Did he forget I was relate to Lucille Mariel? She had taught me well. "And I apologise if I forgot that you were infinitely superior to me."

"I am trying to make choices to make everyone's life better. It is nothing to do with his personal feelings." Caspian defended, stepping forward slightly to the point where he could have brushed his nose up against mine if he desired. I no longer felt so exposed, so confused and blurry. Why as this conversation helping me to forget the shame? Or rather, why did I feel so much more confident in rebutting the King's words than my friend's?

"Are you sure? Because this seems quite personal, Your Majesty."

"Do you have any idea how lonely this process makes me? How few genuine friends I'm able to keep among the politics and the deception?" This point seemed more tender than the previous one. I held back my rebuttal, digging my fingernails into my palm in the way that managed to keep me grounded to the situation. I knew that he would surely be lonely - it seemed as though Julien and Karinna were - but never once had I thought this to be a major wounding point for him.

Why was he bringing this up? Had he become to consider me as something of a friend?

"You don't know how difficult is to find anyone that I have a true connection with. I'm searching for people who understand him and not the king, that want to understand Caspian and not just a tool for power." His face was flushed and agitated, his hair disheveled from where he'd ran his hand through it. I could understand this feeling. It was one that I had often grappled with myself.

I stepped forwards, swallowing down my fear and guilt that was still threatening to spill over. Caspian's chest was still heaving as he attempted to catch his breath, his eyes bright as I allowed the frustration and annoyance settle in me for a moment.

Had I been wrong? Had I been wrong in what I had been trying to do? I wasn't sure. Had my feelings simply been lust rather than...something else?
"What do you think I've been trying to do?" I said slowly, allowing myself to meet his gaze and thickly swallowing as I did so. No, my feelings hadn't been wrong or misplaced. They were as strong as ever, just slightly more complex now.
Lord Markus Howard

I let the door to my chamber swing shut behind me and, after checking that the corridor was deserted, I started down it, my arms swinging by my sides. My rose had lost its first petal today but even that couldn't dampen my mood - one petal so close to Yule was nothing compared to last year when there had been merely a single petal remaining by the servant's ball. Apparently, I had been inhabiting a rather terrible headspace last year.

Now I was yearning to know just how Georgie's rose was faring; we always competed over whose rose died first, even if our competitiveness had little affect if the true meaning of the roses was to be believed. It was usually mine that perished first and yet I was feeling positive about my chances this year. Despite the horrific events of the last couple of days, I had woken feeling almost giddy and that mentality was yet to ebb away - whether that was associated with the glasses of mulled wine I was regularly consuming or who my lunchtime company had been I wasn't sure.

Oh, to hell with it, of course I was sure. Not even the news of another body could destroy the aura of giddiness that I had built up around myself.

Lord Torian had come to eat lunch with me and our conversation had soon turned to a competitive game of cards, fueled by mulled wine and tiny cubes of cheese. Torian had, at first, suggested chess but I had quickly diverted his attention - I was awful at chess and had never won a game, despite Georgie's attempts to teach me some fool-proof tricks. I would have been happy to play anything but preferred to take part in something I knew that I was fairly competent at and wouldn't make myself look like a complete idiot around him.

Because, he was very good at cards. And chess. And everything it seemed.

We hadn't bet for anything because, well, neither of us had brought it up. At least from where I had been sitting, while we had been getting competitive things hadn't been getting...that competitive. I hadn't wanted to bankrupt him while our friendship was only just beginning.

Still. I knew exactly what I would have bet for if we had decided to put something on the line.

I don't know whether I would have actually bet on my desired interaction because I might have been too nervous when the situation arose. There was something about the shine of his hair and the warmth of his smile that made my hands begin to sweat. I didn't want to scare him off and send him running, something that had metaphorically happened before with the extremely select number of men who eaten lunch inside of my chamber.

I didn't even know if Torian though like that, or thought of me like that. He might be in love with one of the noble ladies for all I knew. He might be seeing our exchanges as simply a friendship; he might presume that I spent every single one of my lunches with an attractive lord whose parents owned acres of olive trees.

I had been moments away from blowing my cover and admitting something to him. Something about the way he made me want to smile all of the time and filled me with an effervescent happiness that made me feel as though I was filled with bubbles. I had managed to contain myself, however, which I knew could only be a benefit.
I could never know just how someone would react to my opinions or my beliefs and if I made the mistake of admitting them to the wrong person, I could end up locked behind bars if enough people started a witch-hunt against me. Georgie and I had talked at length about the worst-case scenarios about what could happen and prison would be a light reward.

The second Torian had left the room, I had swung back in my chair and let out the deepest breath I had ever held. My nerves and excitement had been compressed deep into my stomach for far too long and now I needed to break free from the confines of my chamber, if only temporarily.

I needed something to do that wasn't simply sitting inside of my chamber, drinking mulled wine and sweating about whether Torian was aware of my feelings and whether I could dare to ask him if he was.

I knew that there was currently no training exercises taking place so I couldn't go and practice and feel the sting of the wind against my skin as opposed to the nerves in my stomach. I could try and hunt down Connell to go over our trade deal but I restrained myself from this idea - that would make me sound too eager and I didn't want to seem to desperate. We couldn't let on just how terribly we needed support from other nations.

I turned the corner, smiling at a passing noblewoman, and spotted Tristan coming down the corridor. I had never had particularly much interaction with Tristan, but was aware of him through Georgie and Lysa. I knew, however, that I had never seen him look so frustrated, his dark eyebrows pulled tightly across his face.

I halted my pace in order to talk to him but he quickly passed by me, disappearing down a nearby servant's corridor. What was wrong with him? I was aware that the deaths were putting everyone on edge and were straining tensions almost to breaking point but I had never seen this much intense emotion from Tristan. Whenever I saw him, he always seemed happy and cheerful and, if not, his expression was always neutral.

Had something happened that I didn't know about? Something else regarding Georgie?

No. I wouldn't allow my uplifted mood to be ruined by thoughts founded in no fact or explanation.

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I halted for a moment outside of the rose garden, resisting my urge to press my hands up against the glass. The garden really did have a magical feel to it, the way the roses seemed to be perfectly formed and almost frozen in time, trapped behind the glass walls. There was a thin path snaking through the rose bushes that citizens could use to navigate the garden and a handful of benches strategically placed to ensure the best view. In summer, when the sun heated and reflected off the glass, I could spend an entire afternoon simply sat, thinking and watching the subtle movement of the roses in the wind.

Everything was always so still and so perfect, never a petal or thorn out of place. It wasn't difficult to believe that the room had been blessed by Annalie, that the blooms were being protected by some higher power.

Of course, some people thought the roses were a load of rubbish and were perfectly open about that fact. I listened to these arguments - and would often laugh along with them if I had been drinking - but something inside of me made it impossible for me to totally dismiss the lore. I knew that it sounded illogical but there was just something inside of me that couldn't completely denounce them.

"Markus!" I ripped my eyes away from the glass wall to see Karinna coming towards me, her face looking more strained than usual. As she grew closer, I noticed that her fists were clenched and her
"Is everything alright?" I instantly asked. "Are you sick?"

"No, I'm fine." Karinna dismissed. "I -"

"You don't look fine." I interrupted and she frowned. I wanted to sigh - I really was awful at speaking with women. "I didn't mean that, you look great but -"

"I had a fight with Georgie." Karinna said by way of explanation and I slowly nodded. Arguments between Georgie and Karinna were almost unheard of but weren't exactly difficult for me to imagine. Both she and Georgie were remarkably stubborn and strong-willed and yet they were usually able to resolve their problems fairly quickly. I couldn't remember the last time I had seen Karinna look so distressed because of this.

"I know Georgie can be a bit of a handful sometimes." I started. "What was it about?" Karinna didn't speak for a moment, her gaze slipping to the floor as she bit her lip and swallowed. "What?"

"This is going to sound insane." She said cautiously and I frowned.

"Okay."

"And you can't tell anyone. Anyone." I nodded, my curiosity and panic growing with every passing second. Karinna sighed.

"Georgie was trying to tell me something but I wasn't listening." She said. "And I was an awful friend and now she hates me but there's something else going on. With Queen Estella." I raised an eyebrow, a plethora of theories suddenly filling my head. I was pretty sure my dislike for the Lakosian queen was mutual but she had inflicted it on herself - the rumours surrounding her brutality and coldness were not ones I could ignore.

"Georgie thinks Queen Estella has magical abilities." That was most certainly not what I had been expecting and I felt my eyes grow wide. Karinna seemed to freeze as she spoke, as though she had to force her mouth to produce the words. I didn't really know what to think. It didn't seem real. People possessing magical abilities was still a fairly new idea for me and yet a no means less exciting one.

"All the rumours are true then," I murmured, because aside from the rumours I had heard about Estella's brutality, I had also heard the ones regarding the magic the Lakosians supposedly possessed. Or rather, they did possess. At least Estella.

"If that's what Georgie thinks then it's probably true." I said, knowing that there was absolutely no way she would say something like this if she didn't have evidence or real conviction that she was true.

"And I think - she said that the murders -" Karinna trailed off and I suddenly caught onto her train of thought.

"Oh shit." I mumbled, all of the pieces beginning to slide together. Estella. Her power. Her magic.

"But how does Georgie know?"

"Estella did something to her." Karinna said carefully and I instantly frowned. I didn't care if Estella had magical abilities or an entire cavalry or anything; if she hurt Georgie, then nothing was off-limits.

"What? What did she do?" Karinna started to look slightly uncomfortable but there was a steeliness
in her eyes.

"I think that Georgie should tell you that." She said slowly and I felt as though my throat was going to close up. What had that bitch queen done to her? She clearly hadn't killed her if we were still having this conversation but I knew that there were worse ways to be tortured that didn't involve dying. I needed to find her. I needed to make sure she was okay and then figure out how we were going to approach this new piece of information.

"And she looked so upset when we were fighting and now I can't find her - " Karinna sighed, her eyes looking watery. I gave her what I hoped was a reassuring smile.

"I know exactly where she is." I said steadily, watching Karinna's face relax a little. "I'll handle it."
"Welcome Markus." I sharply inhaled as Annalie spoke, keeping my eyes pinned on the floor. I knew that there was no consideration for titles or rank from Annalie, even the King was addressed by his first name, and yet her voice still startled me. The marble floor was beginning to dig uncomfortably into my knees and freeze my legs through the fabric of my gown; the angle at which I was holding my head was beginning to strain my neck but I didn't move. I didn't feel as though I had the energy to move.

I had no idea how Markus had discovered my location and I reasoned that, as his footsteps echoed closer, it was either the result of an arduous search for me or he knew me better than I thought he did. I had known that I couldn't hide my situation forever and that, sooner or later, I would be discovered.

The peace had been uplifting, however. The complete silence in which I knelt at the altar, the heady scent of incense burning around me and the stained-glass windows glinting in the faint sunlight had been a welcome escape from...everything else. Everything that I was faced with outside the solid oak doors that protected the chapel.

Markus slowly knelt down next to me, his shoulder lightly brushing against mine. I didn't react and kept my eyes pinned on the ornately embroidered panel in front of me. I didn't want to look at him; I didn't particularly want to talk to him either. My throat was void of words and my eyes too open to my emotions, too evident of the weakness brewing within me.

"My rose has finally lost a petal," He said with a dramatic sigh, his voice casual and nonchalant, as though we were having a light-hearted and friendly exchange. Our exchange was currently none of those things and yet this simple phrase encouraged me to relax a little. Markus had seen me at my worse - my almost worse - and had seen my watery eyes more times than almost any person on the planet.

"Yours has lost four petals, I know." He continued, his smile growing. "But there's still time for me to fall apart yet. Perhaps God is just having an off day - " I saw him look up towards where Annalie was perched on her dais and wink in her direction. Only Markus would dare to flirt with a Priestess.

"You're allowed to slap him if you wants to." I said, my voice hoarse as I caught Annalie's amused expression. At least she wasn't offended by Markus' antics. Then we really would be in trouble.

"I'm a pacifist." Annalie's voice was light and soft yet clear, a steeliness behind it that rang out through the chapel. Markus sighed dramatically again.

"That just figures, doesn't it?"

"And it will take more than one bored noble to change those beliefs." I could detect the hint of humour in her voice and I wanted to grin but every inch of my body still felt drained - drained of emotion, drained of energy. I was a walking husk of myself.

"Fair enough." Markus said with a grin, his eyes darting away from Annalie towards my figure. Markus could talk so easily and effortlessly. There was no wavering in his conversation or his voice, no whisper of nerves or insecurity. I, on the other hand, had absolutely no clue how to speak to him.
about what happened. Did I even dare?

"Karinna said something about your little argument." He said slowly, lowering his tone as a breath hitched in my throat. I knew that he was manipulating Karinna's words and the state that he was observing me to be in because I highly doubted that Karinna would have described it so. I swallowed deeply and forced myself to look over at him.

"You talked to Karinna?" He nodded. "I didn't think she'd want to speak to anyone associated with her me."

"I don't know the details of your 'little argument' and I don't really care right now." He said, his tone still gentle but evidently growing blunter. "I care more about you. I'm worried about you. I - " He paused for a moment, sighed, and reached out to take my hand that was resting in my lap. "Karinna said something about Estella acting out towards you."

He knew. He knew something had happened. I was going to have to tell him. I was going to have to..

I watched Markus look up and meet Annalie's gaze again. She nodded slightly. "I promise to go temporarily deaf for the duration for your conversation."

Unease and sickness and fear was bubbling up inside of me. I didn't want to relive the moment in the alcove to Markus; I didn't want to relive that moment for anyone, least of all myself, and yet that was what was replaying in my head over and over again.

I took Markus' hand and squeezed it. I had to tell him. I had to tell him to move on to the greater paradox, the greater issue that was begging to be addressed. Estella had magical abilities; Estella was, at least partly, responsible for the murders. I was sure of it.

I took another deep breath. I turned to look Markus squarely in the eye.

"You have to promise that you won't storm off in a rage and that you won't go and hit anyone." I said sternly, the humour in my words lost because of my nervous tone.

"Sadly, I'm not the one in this room who is a pacifist." He said with a wry grin. I knew that this was the very best I was going to achieve with Markus. I would just have to hope that by the time I had finished my explanation, the person he yearned to hit was not Caspian.

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Despite my inclination to keep my voice steadied and controlled, I had resulted in losing my nerve, spitting every detail out that I could remember and breaking down crying half way through. I didn't know whether my words were even coherent; I was more concerned with simply getting them out there. By the time I finished speaking, Markus had looked as though he would quite happily punch Caspian in the face so I figured that at least some of my garbled speech had been understood.

I kept repeating the same statement, both inside of my head and to Markus. It was Estella I blamed for all this, not Caspian. He had been a victim as much as I had in the situation.

That didn't remove the feeling of his hands crawling over my skin, however, no matter how many times I told myself that he had had absolutely no autonomy over his own body.

Then, once I had managed to convince Markus that I was, at least physically, fine, we had had a long talk about what we were going to do about it all and how we could possibly go about accusing a Queen of the crimes we believed she was involved with.

We had then parted ways, I somewhat reluctantly leaving the chapel and starting at ever sound I
heard. Markus had gone to locate and talk to the noblemen that he deeply trusted, in the hope of building up some support. I knew that we wouldn't be able to get anywhere with the testimonies of just two people and this would provide us with more assistance should we come under attack - we would no doubt need something of a resistance should Estella wish to challenge us on our views in court, or by using more unsavory methods.

I, on the other hand, had a far more solitary task; I was determined on barricading myself in the library for however long it took - I was expecting to receive very little sleep tonight.

I had already searched the library and found it to be entirely deserted, something that both pleased me and pained me. I wouldn't need to worry about being startled or hiding my reading from any passing nobles or servants but Karinna wasn't here. She was probably avoiding all areas where she knew I could possibly be. Markus had told me that she had been the one to tell him that I was upset and that she had been looking for me, but there was still something solid and unmoving inside of me didn't want to see her just yet.

I knew that I needed to go and apologise to her; I had treated her foully. But the prospect of what Markus and I had to accomplish was weighing heavily on my mind. I had to find out what Estella was hoping to accomplish and the ways in which we could stop her. I hated to admit it, or even think it, but Karinna was going to have to wait a moment. I was going to stay up all night and I was willing to go through every single book if that's what it took to find some scrap of proof and help that we could use against Estella.

The hardest part was pushing Karinna and Caspian from my mind. I needed to focus on what I was doing. Markus was risking his reputation - our reputation - and potentially his safety by revealing what he knew and I had to be prepared to put the same on the line and the same amount of effort. That was if I didn't fall asleep on the table, the flickering oil lamp by my side my only company. I was already feeling tired, my eyelids drooping, and I was bound to have a supreme migraine by the morning but if it meant that we could put a stop to what was happening, I would bear it.

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I quickly lost track of time, the minutes folding into hours as I combed page after page, book after book, section after section. Now I was hurrying down the corridor, the oil lamp clutched in my hand, towards Karinna's chamber attempting to stay silent. My eyes were beginning to close, my shoes uncomfortably pinching my feet but I had no time to return to my chamber and dress in something more comfortable and more appropriate for late night escapades. I had already taken my hair out of its elaborate plait - the pins had been squeezing at my skull - and now my hair hung loose down my back.

From the library, Karinna's chamber was the closest of the people who I deemed I could burden with the information that I had found. I knew what was going on and, fuck, I had known that Estella a maniac but I never would have been able to guess this. My blood had ran cold when I had read the page; I had been forced to re-read it just to ensure my mind hadn't been jumping to conclusions.

The castle was eerily silent as I halted outside Karinna's door and knocked as loudly as I dared, the dim light casting gloomy shadows across the floor. I didn't understand why I was feeling so nervous and on-edge but I felt as though I was going to be sick. What if Estella was already doing it? What if I was too late?

I didn't know what I was doing. This whole thing was so much bigger than myself and I was feeling utterly overwhelmed. I couldn't allow myself to be swept away in the unknown and the fear; I had to keep my head.

The door finally opened, a bleary-eyed Karinna staring back at me, dressed in a simple lace
nightdress. I swallowed. I couldn't allow myself to be swept away and that included by my own emotions.

"I know what's going on." I said quickly, lowering my voice to almost a whisper. "We need to alert Caspian."

"We?" Of course Karinna wouldn't want anything to do with me. I had behaved abysmally towards her and now I was -

"I don't know if I can do this alone." I tried, my voice barely audible. Karinna didn't speak, just calmly pushed the door closed. I didn't know if I would be able to continue functioning if I had to handle everything on my own. Was this how Caspian always felt? When he had been talking about feeling lonely and isolated was this what he had been talking about?

The door was suddenly wrenched open and Karinna reappeared, a dressing gown now thrown over her shoulders and her hair pulled back from her face. She quickly closed the door again and locked it, meeting my gaze with a smile. I smiled back, a wave of relief crashing over me.

She didn't hate me. She didn't.

"I have to tell you something." Karinna suddenly murmured.

"We really don't have time for the long, emotional apologies if that's what it is - " I mumbled back, feeling myself smirk slightly but Karinna's expression remained severe and determined. The smirk slipped from my face and I frowned.

"I have magic. Like Estella."

Holy shit.

I didn't know what to say. All the words I could have said disappeared from my throat and with everything that was currently floating around my head, I couldn't fully digest this. And yet, Karinna looked so scared and vulnerable as she blinked back at me that I knew I had to say something. She needed someone to not judge her and simply accept this part of her which had clearly been eating her up inside. Her trepidation around any mention of Estella and her magic suddenly made so much more sense.

I nodded slowly, relaxing my face and smiling slightly despite the nerves running through me. I had a hold barrage of questions to ask her that I didn't have time to ponder but I couldn't simply wash over this moment.

"Okay."

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I knocked on Caspian's door, ignoring the glares of the guards on either side of me. I did not have time to deal with condescending assholes right now. We had bigger things to deal with.

"His Majesty is asleep." The guard on my right said sharply, as though this wasn't already obvious seeing as it was the early hours of the morning. I looked over at him, raising my chin and meeting his gaze.

"And now he needs to wake up."

"He is the king - "

"And we have a national emergency on our hands - " I rapped again on the door, shooting Karinna a
worried look. Was Caspian a deep sleeper? What if he didn't answer the door. The guards clearly weren't on my side, or rather, the guard on my right wasn't on my side. The guard on my left was actually doing his job and not communicating with me.

"What have you done? Broken a nail?"

"I'll break your face in a minute - " I spat through gritted teeth, knocking on the door again. Had this man gone temporarily deaf?

"You can't go in." The guard said, shuffling slightly so he was blocking Karinna and I's path.

"This is ridiculous." I murmured to Karinna, watching her raise an eyebrow at the guard. She was the daughter of the General and thus had far more prestige than I did. A guard wouldn't dare speak to her in such a manner which meant -

"It's about me isn't it?" I said with a sigh. "That because my aunt's a courtesan, you don't trust her with your precious king. If you won't let me in then you can be the one to explain to the King why they're all dead in an hour." I was shouting now, my hands resting on my hips as I glared up towards the guards. He opened his mouth to speak but before he could, the door swung open to reveal Caspian. His hair was wonderfully disheveled and mused, his outfit of a large white shirt and black breeches seeming far too simple and intimate for me to be witnessing.

Karinna and I dropped into curtsies as Caspian cleared his throat.

"We need to speak with you. Immediately." I said, ignoring the croakiness of my voice and the flicker of apprehension that appeared across Caspian's face. "This is serious." I was having trouble meeting his gaze, the sliver of his chest revealed by his shirt causing my heart to palpitate even more than it already was.

"Come in, then - "

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"So Estella is raising an army of the undead?"

In a similar vein to how I conversed earlier with Markus, the second Caspian had closed the door to his chamber I had blurted out everything we knew, with Karinna inputting her own comments every now and then. My rapid commentary was really just a distraction from Caspian's appearance; he kept running his hands through his hair in an attempt to flatten it but was resulting in making me all the more captivated with him.

"She's completing a ritual that raises the dead, yes."

"And it's happening tonight." Karinna added.

"She's not just doing this for the hell of it. She wants to take over. She wants you dead and your throne ready for the taking."

"Shit." Caspian murmured, sinking down into an armchair with his head in his hands. I looked over at Karinna, her expression strangely calm, as I bit my lip. During my time in the library, I had been evaluating and re-evaluating every move that I thought I should make, every path that I wanted Markus, Karinna and even the King to go down in order to stop Estella's scheme. But, for myself, I had stopped thinking after I told Caspian about what was happening and, now that I had accomplished that, I was wondering just exactly what my next move should be.

The room was dimly lit by a scattering of candles, casting a warm glow onto Caspian's figure as I
stared down at him. I didn't know what to say; this whole situation was madness and none of my straight-talking conversation would be able to remedy that. The desperation was clear on Caspian's face, his eyes focused as he stared down at his hands, no doubt racking his brains in order to concoct an idea, a theory, anything.

I might have had to make all kinds of decisions in my life that could change the very make-up of Wedgemore forever but Wedgemore was only a miniscule part of the kingdom that he ruled over. His decision could lead thousands of people to their deaths if Estella's regime turned brutal, or indeed save them. He was only human and yet he was expected to be the savior and the leader and to save everybody.

"What should we do?" Karinna murmured beside me, her arms tightly folded. We hadn't spoken any more about her revelation; the fact that she too possessed magical abilities. It wasn't just the Lakosians whom had something magical running through their blood. Did she know the extent of her abilities? For how long had she known? All these questions had become secondary, however, in the face of a desperate man who was still staring into space and searching for an answer.

We needed to stop Estella, that much was simple. The logistics, on the other hand, were far from that.

I suddenly spun around, Karinna flinching next to me, as shouting began to echo from outside the door and outside the open window that looked out onto the corridor. I stared over at Karinna with wide eyes as the shouts turned to pierced, sudden screaming. Without thinking, I hurried over to the door and secured the latch. Caspian was the only object standing in the way of her path to power. As though a single locked door would be able to do anything against Estella.

The screams suddenly vanished, silence ringing in their wake. What was happening? Who had been screaming? Caspian was pacing now - he had started towards the door before freezing, the true gravity of the situation hitting him. He was not the type of person to sit back while others were in danger or were risking their lives, but what about when he was the target?

There was suddenly a sharp knocking at the door and I inhaled deeply. "Shit." I breathed, looking around at Karinna and Caspian's shocked expressions.

"That is not my guard - " Caspian started, his voice becoming lost in the shouting coming from the courtyard - loud, strangled voices screaming and yelling, fracturing the eerie silence that had descended on the castle. It was happening. It was happening now. Estella.

"What's going on?" Karinna whispered, her eyes wide.

"They'll kill him - " Caspian suddenly stormed over to window, giving a passing look down to the courtyard, before turning to his expansive bookshelf. Now was not the time to be choosing a novel -

"I know that." He picked out a slender novel, pulling it backwards, and all of sudden there was a metallic click and the shelves had jutted out from the walls. I raise an eyebrow at Karinna, but she was already hurrying over to where Caspian was standing. "We need to get out of here, we're sitting ducks. And we need reinforcements if we want any hope of taking on what's down there - "

"I'm already handling that."

"What?" Caspian asked, collecting his sword that was lying on the dining table and a handful of daggers that had been hidden in a chest.

"I woke Sternwood on my way across." I said, meeting Karinna's gaze. "I told him roughly what
was going on; I'm willing to bet that the army's already half assembled for you."

"You really thought of everything, didn't you - " He said, almost amusedly, looking between myself and Karinna as he pulled the shelf back to reveal a dark staircase leading downwards.

"We need to get you out of here, out of the castle." Karinna said, as the shouting suddenly intensified. Oh God. Just what was going to happen tonight? How many lives were going to be lost?

"That's not happening." Caspian said determinedly, sheathing his sword in a belt he was fastening around his waist. "A captain doesn't abandon the ship and I won't leave my people. Not for anything."

- Dun dun dun! What's going to happen tonight?
Lord Julien Cavendish, Marquis of Irvington

I blearily forced one eye open, wincing back against the sliver of moonlight slipping through the curtains. I had no idea in regards to the time but something had woken me; there was some sort of commotion happening out in the corridor, the sound of slightly raised voices echoing from the corridor outside. I couldn't recall falling asleep - I was lying on top of my bed, still fully clothed, a book digging uncomfortably into my stomach.

The last thing I could recall was lying with the tome in the crook of my elbow, my mind wandering onto the topic of the latest death, of that of the blacksmith. Then I had started thinking about everything else, about the other deaths and the strained diplomatic tensions and -

Caspian had seemed a little odd that afternoon and no matter how hard I had tried to convince myself it was nothing, that it was simply because of the blacksmith's death, I hadn't been able to ignore it. Perhaps it wasn't just because of the blacksmith's death? Had there been something else going on with him that I hadn't known about?

My eyes began to slip closed again, before a sudden sound outside jolted me awake. The commotion outside wasn't passing; if anything, the noises seemed to be getting louder with every passing moment. What was happening? I groggily pushed myself upright and swung my legs off the bed, reaching for my dagger and bow and arrows that I had left resting on an armchair. I fastened the dagger to my belt and swung the quiver over my shoulders; it never hurt to be prepared and I despised the idea of being caught up in a situation where the very item needed to free myself was locked inside my chamber.

I cautiously opened the door, blinking back my tiredness and peering out into the corridor to see it filled people, hurriedly rushing around and speaking in low, frantic voices. I instantly frowned and opened the door even further, no one giving me a second glance. This was much more than the usual nighttime activity of a servant searching for more bedding for their master; this was something else all together.

I caught sight of a passing soldier that I recognised, one whom Caspian and I frequently joked with at his station outside the Great Hall. Why did a solider possibly need to be awake and dressed in full armor at such an early hour of the morning?

"What the hell is going on?" I walked in step beside him, ignoring the sword that was sheathed at his belt. Why was he armed?

"Sternwood is raising the army. We had orders to report to the armory before meeting with our Captains to receive our instructions."

"But why?" Somebody had to know what was going on. Caspian. I needed to find Caspian. He shrugged.

"We just do what we're told. But I heard some rumours about some kind of attack - "

Shit. That was what I had been afraid of hearing. Was this the result of the ritual that someone had been planning? Had it finally happened?

Okay, now I really needed to find Caspian. I needed to make sure that he was safe and that he didn't
do anything stupid; what I considered to be stupid is what Caspian considered to be normal, as though putting his life on the line was simply something he was expected to do in his role. I was trying to convince him that it was entirely the opposite.

"Where's the King?"

"I don't know." Hopefully, he would be have been sensible enough to remain in his chamber but I had stopped holding out on promises such as these. Knowing Caspian, he would probably be arming himself in the armory along with the rest of the soldiers. "I wish that I could be more help - "

"It's okay."

"I did hear from someone that there's some kind of commotion coming from the crypt - "

"The crypt?" Why there of all places? Why would anyone be lurking around the memorials and the coffins and the decaying corpses? "Right. Thanks."

I started working my way through the never-ending streams of people, no real idea of where I was going. I needed to find Caspian and I needed to find mother and hope that someone knew what was going on and were in the process of formulating some kind of plan.

Because a commotion coming from the crypt would never be a positive or reassuring sign. Everything down there was dead, or was supposed to be.

I double checked that my dagger was still on my belt, gripping onto it for a bizarre sort of stability. Everything around me was chaos, with people screaming and pushing through the crowds in an attempt to force their way through. Everything felt blurred which was undoubtedly a mix of my sleep-deprived brain and the fact that I had no clue what was happening around me. I needed to find someone who had at least some inclination towards what was going on.

I slowly made my way down the corridor, torn between moving as quickly as possible and not wanting to contribute to the clear stress and panic that was brewing around me. I peered over the heads of the crowd, attempting to find someone who had a good chance of knowing what was happening. My eyes widened as I spotted the familiar silver circlet and figure moving in long, pale blue robes. Annalie was always calm, whatever the given situation and I supposed that she must have seen an awful lot - it was her job to digest and acknowledge whatever problems and issues her congregation laid at her feet with grace and empathy.

A handful of people were blocking my path to her; I strained my neck peering over heads to see her checking on those who passed her, encouraging people to find their families and to stay in their chambers if they could or make their way towards one of the parlors. She was being genuinely helpful and wasn't allowing her mind to be overtaken by panic; I, on the other hand, was running around and panicking about Caspian. I needed to keep my head.

"What's going on?" I half-gasped, standing face to face with her. Her face seemed paler than usual, her lips a firm line.

"Something unholy is happening."

"The crypt?" Annalie nodded. The rumours surrounding the commotion in the crypt was true? There really was something moving down there? "There is talk of stones moving and shifting and the noises - " I swear that I saw her physically shiver. "The dead are returning to life."

Oh fuck. I could tell by the genuine fear in Annalie's pale blue eyes that this was no philosophical statement with some deeper meaning. The bodies in the crypt really were rising from the dead.
Surely that was impossible? No human force could ever -

But what about a force that wasn't entirely human? What about the ritual the murders had completed? This must be what the perpetrator was attempting to achieve. They wanted to raise the dead. But why? What was their goal?

Whatever it was, I knew now that this night was going to be one that changed people's lives forever. The day that the dead walked again was one that would not be forgotten. We had to get this right.

"I need to find the King."

"I've already been to his chamber." Of course she had. At least someone seemed to be acting pragmatically. "But he wasn't there. The door was wide open but the room was empty."

"That is not good." I murmured, more to myself. Where could he be? Who had gone to his rooms?

"I'm going to help people find shelter and start to put together something of a hospital in case - "

"Good idea." I knew what she meant - in case tonight decided to go south. How could we possibly stand against an army of the undead? "I'm going to find the King and my mother - " Annalie nodded and briefly smiled before she passed me, immediately heading down the corridor.

One more name snagged in my mind - one more person that I wanted to search for. Karinna. What if she was hurt? What if she too had disappeared from her chamber? I swallowed deeply. My own words circulating around my skull: I couldn't afford to lose my head. I needed to be able to tell the difference between my loyalty to the crown and to my heart for all of this to not get complicated.

Saying that, both of those loyalties were remarkably similar whenever I considered it.

My head shot up as I suddenly heard someone shout my name and I almost sighed with relief as I realised who was forcing themselves through the onslaught of people. Mother was still dressed in her nightclothes, a thick red dressing gown wrapped around her. Her eyes were wide as she came towards me, forcing me into a tight embrace before I could even speak. I could feel her shallow breaths against my skin as I held her close. Had she been running?

"What's happening?" I asked, for what seemed like the hundredth time in the last hour. I wasn't accustomed to being so clueless when it came to state affairs and I didn't like it.

"There's some strange movement from the crypt but I haven't sent anybody to investigate. I don't need anybody killed so soon into proceedings." She explained, pulling away from me and flinging her long hair over one shoulder. "Sources have told me, however, that it is in fact the Lakosians who are arming themselves - "

What? It was the bloody Lakosians who were attacking us?

"We were building an alliance." I said weakly, my mother raising an bold eyebrow. Clearly this alliance was as good as pig shit now. But if it was the Lakosians rallying against us... "This is all Estella?"

"It would seem so." Mother said, firmly taking me by the crook of my elbow and bringing me hastily down the corridor. Was Estella the one who had been the ritual? The perpetrator of the murders? That was what my senses were telling me. "We never should have let the murdering bitch into the castle."

So much for democracy and diplomacy now...
"It seems that your friends Lady Karinna and Lady Georgiana were the first ones to raise the alarm."

"Really?" I knew that there was an underlying message in the way she said my friends but I didn't have time to debate the intricacies of her speech now. "Of course she did - "

"And it seems that also alerted the King."

"You've seen him?"

"No." Mother said sharply. She was certainly bitter about this. "Sternwood has seen him and briefly brought me up to speed."

"Right."

"Anything to add?"

"Annalie is making a room where the injured can be taken, once the fighting starts." This seemed to be an inevitable fact now. The Lakosians were rallying against us and Estella was raising an undead army to fight alongside her.

I had a dreadful feeling that we might need more than single room to store all our injured.

And our dead.
We paused at the foot of the stairwell, the secret passage way leading out into a dark alcove. The passageway had been narrow, almost suffocatingly so, but it was better than the alternative - coming face to face with whoever had been knocking at the door. A group of vengeful Lakosian lords, perhaps? Or Estella perhaps? I was thankful that we would never know.

And yet, the situation was far from resolved. In fact, it was only just beginning.

I stepped forwards a little, allowing Karinna to emerge from the passageway. Did Lucille know about this? I knew that she knew every figure and every alcove within the castle walls but what about one in the King's own quarters? Who else knew about the stairwell behind the bookshelf?

I watched Caspian draw out his sword, watching the light reflect from the blade. I swallowed. When I was nervous, my mind began to wander and I began to ramble. I wasn't sure the word nervous even covered just how I was feeling; a battle was swiftly unfolding around me, one that featured an army of undead soldiers.

I was feeling so much more than nervous.

Karinna and I had barely spoken in the minutes it had taken us to descend the stairs; words had seemed insignificant. At least I knew Karinna was safe, for the moment. I urgently wanted to find Lucille and Markus. I needed to know that they were okay, because it wasn't just Estella's undead soldiers that were attacking. The Lakosian nobles that were part of Estella's court would also be arming themselves, undoubtedly on their queen's orders.

I knew that there was safety in numbers, however, and surely being in a group of three was better than being alone. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if Karinna or indeed anyone was injured and I could have done something to prevent it. I didn't currently have any weapons with me but that didn't mean I was defenseless; I was very good at kicking, in a whole manner of places.

Kicking a Lakosian noble in the chest was only a short-term solution, however. I needed to think long-term. That would be how I was able to protect those around me.

Every thought in my head continued to come back to one thing: Estella. She had started this entire process and something inside of me knew that she was the only one who could end it.

We needed to find Estella. And yet, if she had the magical abilities to raise the dead I severely doubted that a single sword and a lot of willpower would be able to do much against her.

"We need to keep together." Caspian said, his voice low as he turned to face us. This section of the castle may be deserted for the moment but the shouts and clashes of metal that I could hear didn't sound too far away. "We should head for my office. Sternwood will probably be there with Julien and Hestia. I need to know what exactly is going on."

"We'll follow you." I said, Karinna shooting me a look. This was the most logical option; he was the one with the sword and the dagger and, even though I hated to presume, probably the superior fighting technique.

"Aren't we supposed to be protecting the King?" Karinna murmured to me as we silently began to
make our way down the corridor. My heart felt as though it was jumping, a combination of the nerves and the fact that Caspian was stood mere inches in front of me. I needed to control myself; I was not going to be killed because I had been distracted by his hair.

"It's survival of the fittest. He's the one with the sword." I paused for a moment, a question that I had been wanting to ask since we had stepped into the passageway. "Can you fight? With - with your magic?" I thought for a moment that Karinna wasn't going to answer, or she was going to slap me or both. She shrugged slightly.

"I don't know. I might be able to. I've been practicing a little...." Her voice trailed off as we reached the end of the corridor and Caspian turned to look at us, his sword gripped tightly in his hand. I recognised the hilt; it was the sword that had famously belonged to High King Peter. The sword that was now something of a legend.

"We need to move quickly and quietly." He said, his voice barely more than a whisper. "I'll go first, not because - " He quickly added, "you can't defend yourselves but because it makes the most sense." A man who acknowledged that just because we were women, it didn't mean we were defenseless. "We need focusing on keeping moving, not stopping for anything and if we're separated just head for my main office. You'll be safe there."

I wasn't going to allow us to be separated. No.

We silently turned the corner and, pressing ourselves against the wall, speedily moving down the corridor. Our footsteps seemed to echo in the silence, my heart seeming to thump loud enough for the rest of the world to hear it.

The next few moments passed like a blur; a swarm of Lakosian nobles descended down the corridor, charging for us, their weapons held aloft. Caspian stormed forwards, skilfully disarming two of them and managing to keep another occupied. Yet there was another swarm incoming from the opposite end of the corridor, reaching Karinna first and seizing her arms before reaching me. I angrily kicked and writhed in their grip, imposing all the techniques and tricks that I could recall from my old tutors. I could faintly hear Karinna and Caspian's shouts over the clash of metal as hands dug into my arms and began to drag me away, seemingly oblivious to the blows that I inflicted to them.

No. No -

I had lost sight of Karinna as she'd been dragged away. Caspian was still valiantly fighting as I dug my feet into the floor, attempting to regain some leverage.

There were too many of them. I knew it. Caspian couldn't possibly fight all of them alone and he needed more reinforcements than I could give him.

He needed to get away. It was he that Estella wanted and I couldn't allow her to get her hands on him.

I was yelling at him to run, ignoring the painful grip of the nobles hands on my skin, the vice-like hold on my neck, in my hair, around my hips. More seemed to be coming every second as I was dragged backwards, Caspian heroically - or perhaps stupidly - continuing to fight.

He had to run. No matter how much it pained him, he ran to run and regroup and find reinforcements. I locked eyes with him for a moment as he paused for breath, his sword now shining with blood. He was panting heavily, blood dripping from his brow, his mouth firm. I mouthed at him
to run, watching the pain and turmoil cross his face. He had to go. He couldn't keep this up.

I was praying that his reason would override his loyalty.

Thankfully, it did. I watched him turn and run, the nobles scurrying after him like rats. The nobles grips' on my arm tightened again and rather than fighting, I allowed them to take me, forcing my fear down.

They hadn't killed myself or Karinna. Estella wanted us alive. She wanted to rule us and she couldn't do that if we were all dead. At least that was what I hoped. She had redefined the boundaries of what I thought was possible.

Caspian was clever and resourceful. He was going to fine.

Now I had to focus on not getting myself killed.

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The nobles certainly had been busy because the Great Hall was cluttered with people, nobles and servants that I recognised and those that seemed more hazy. Armed nobles patrolled the room, swords and daggers and pistols at their sides. I had stopped openly surveying the room because I knew that I had been drawing too much attention to myself and I figured that the way I was going to survive was to be slip as neatly under the radar as I could.

I could feel the bruises that the Lakosian nobles had squeezed into my skin, causing me to wince slightly as I shifted my position. Everyone was sat on the floor, the Lakosians towering above us. I was sat near the front of the hall, the dais in front of where Caspian's throne was positioned for important events.

I kept my eyes low on the ground.

Now it was Estella sat on that throne, her chin held high and her figure resplendent.

Of course she was sat in the bloody chair. Where else would she be? She wanted to see the people that she would rule over, those who would become her subjects, not by choice but by force.

At least that was what she thought.

Many of the Narnian nobles being held hostage in the room were well known to me; some of them were among those we had approached to potentially ally with us so I knew that they, at the very least, were not emotionless sociopaths. I could use this to my advantage. They were already on my side or had claimed to be, meaning they would be more open to one of my plans.

I had located Markus the second that I had arrived in the Hall and had been thrown to the floor. He was sat in front of me to my left, alone, his cloak pulled tightly around him, still dressed in his sleeping clothes, his hair disheveled. Karinna was towards the back of the hall, Lady Swifton by her side. I was comforted in the fact that she didn't have to sit alone.

But the only way I would be truly comforted would be when Estella was quashed, her threats had been neutralized and everyone was free.

I looked over at Markus again, finding his eyes pinned on me. He was sat slightly too far away for the pair of us to talk without being detected and I didn't trust our ability to whisper in the silent room. Every sound, whether the thudding of the guards' footsteps or the creak of the door as more nobles were brought in, would make me jerk and cause my heart to start pounding faster. I didn't want to have to witness Estella's powers in use again, especially not when being used to punish someone.
I inhaled as I saw Markus slowly shift his cloak to reveal more of his belt, his lap, that he was keeping covered with the thick green material. Strapped to his side were three lethal looking daggers, a bow and a quiver of arrows.

How the hell had he managed to keep those hidden? I felt my eyes grow wide before I quickly returned my expression to neutral. I supposed that in all the madness, the guards had been more concerned with capturing as many people as they could rather than thoroughly searching them. And, if Markus had been able to complete this so easily, surely he couldn't be the only noble sat around me hiding a weapon.

"Have you seen Caspian?" I mouthed, cautiously keeping an eye on Estella's gaze and the movement of the guards around the room. Markus shook his head. That had been a long shot. "Lucille? Lysa? Tristan?" Markus shook his head again and I felt my heart sink.

"Sorry."

"Someone needs to get help." I wasn't sure what could constitute as help anymore, seeing as it was the entire city that was under attack, but I hadn't lost hope that there was some kind of resource that we weren't currently exploiting. Markus nodded again, his eyes darting around the room before he landed on me again. I frowned slightly.

"I've got back up." It seemed that I hadn't been the only one to think of the idea to unite some of the lords who were most friendly with us. "They're ready to fight their way out." This was what I was dreading. I wanted to avoid a full-scale war, if at all possible. The chances were looking slimmer by the second.

"People are going to die." Markus nodded ruefully. I had already seen the chaos being caused in the town when the guards had been dragging me down a corridor, never before being so thankful for windows. Lakosian nobles were storming houses and dragging families out into the street, being assisted by mysterious figures in dark shrouds that had seemed to walk like shadows. I knew that I never wanted to look under the hood of one of those things. They had to be members of Estella's undead army that she had brought back from the dead.

"You should go." I narrowed my eyes, watching Markus survey the space behind me as a guard passed by.

"I'm not going without you."

"You have to. You'll be more inconspicuous." I couldn't leave him here. I couldn't leave without him. But then, I knew that his point made sense. He, a tall, muscular man, was more likely to be picked up upon by the guards rather than myself.

I nodded slightly, watching Markus begin to smile before he turned serious again.

I turned my attention away from him, focusing back on Estella. Markus had a plan and I had to trust him; I just had to wait for his signal and then force my way out of the room and towards something that would be able to help us. Caspian, perhaps. Or Lucille. I would always trust her ability to fix everything around me and make things better.

I pressed my hands into the floor, attempting to calm the tension running through my arms. Estella's figure seemed frozen - the only part of her that was moving was her deep, empty eyes as she scanned the room, the people forced to kneel at her feet. I hated the way that she was lording over us, the smug smile painted onto her lips.
I couldn't believe that I had initially respected her and believed in her, especially after what she had done to me.

Suddenly, Estella rose from the throne, her dark eyes narrowing. She stepped forwards, her gown trailing on the floor. I wanted to be sick as a waft of her perfume reached me, something fruity and heady and intoxicating. My stomach was turning - could she sense that we were planning something?

"Put your hands on your heads!" I didn't dare refuse her as the guards all around us suddenly loaded their guns. I pressed both hands onto my head, shooting Markus a worried look. He didn't seem worried and, in fact, there was a look of sheer determination and ferocity in his eyes. We weren't going to be able to defeat Estella by being nervous and quivering in the corner while she ruled triumphantly over us.

I had to do this.

I focused on Markus' hands that were pressed to his head; he was subtly holding up one finger. He was counting down. He was signifying to those around him who he knew would be on his side to fight against him; he was signifying to me that, in two seconds, I was going to have to run.

He held up a second finger and I took in a deep breath.

He held up a third finger and immediately reached for the bow and quiver hidden under his cloak as shouts erupted around me and Markus' associates lunged for the nearest guard. I instantly slung the quiver of my shoulder, reached for an arrow and began shooting in Estella's direction while making myself as small as possible and heading for the doorway.

I didn't care if the arrows didn't hit her. I really didn't care. Making her duck would be enough; I would relish the chance to finish her later.

I wasn't thinking, I was just moving, diving and weaving past frightened bodies as I continued shooting and heading for the doorway. I needed to get out. I was going to get out. I had to. I didn't dare slow down; I didn't know how long the guards would be occupied for and I was going to make the most of every single second I had.

I burst through the doors to the Great Hall and continued running as quickly as I could, ignoring the pain building inside of my chest and the way my legs tangled in the fabric of my gown. I wasn't going to let Estella get anywhere near me, not again. Never. I continued repeating this phrase in my head as I hurtled through the corridor, ignoring the shouts and yells that were echoing from behind me. I wasn't letting Estella to consume my head again, to take over my thoughts and to control my actions.

Never again.

Right now, I was heading for the only person who constituted as back-up in my mind. Lucille. I knew that Wednesdays were, for some reason, her busiest day for customers and that meant she could, theoretically, be anywhere in the castle. But I didn't have time to search every inch of the castle. I had to find her now.

The stables. That was a place she often met with clients. It was secluded and isolated and definitely not the first place that any guard would search for me. I would start my search there.

I continued running, throwing myself around a corner, my heart lurching as I heard footsteps thundering after me. Shit. Oh shit.
I loaded the bow whilst peering over my shoulder. What if I didn't get away? How would Estella punish me? How -

It was Julien. Julien, armed with a bow and quiver of arrows of his own, shooting down the guards who were heading straight for me. I had never been so relieved in all my life.

"Where's Caspian?" I yelled, continuing to run down the corridor as Julien followed me.

"I'm looking too. I'm beginning to think that Estella must already have him."

Shit. Shit. That was the one outcome I had been desperate to prevent. We had to find him; Estella was going to kill him if we didn't.

"I'm trying to find Lucille. We could start evacuating the servants. Markus and Karinna are in the hall, with a hell of a lot of others so -"

"I need to get in there." He murmured, running alongside me for a moment as we took brief cover around a wall. "I'll get on that."

"I'll try and find Caspian." Julien nodded, wiping his forehead on the back of his hand. My heart was hammering so much that I could barely breathe. I had to continue, though. I couldn't dare stop.

"I'll stay to keep them off your trail. You need to go."

I didn't have time to argue. I ran.

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I bolted around the corridor, heavily panting and my hair stuck to my skin with sweat despite the cold. I had managed to avoid being seen, thankful not only for Julien but also for Markus' distraction. Whatever he was doing, he was managing to lure enough guards away to avoid them detecting me.

I located Lucille immediately, she was the only person around that wasn't an equine. She was hurriedly plaiting her hair but stopped for a moment as she caught sight of me, her eyes narrowing as she assessed my haggard appearance and the bow and arrows clutched in my hand. I didn't have time to explain. We needed a place to hide and a place to conjure some kind of plan.

"Everything's gone to shit." I panted, grabbing onto the doorframe for stability so that I didn't collapse into a heap. That was the only way I could think to describe it.
Chapter 52

Lysa Carker

The silence was eating into my skin. My house was far too silent and still, given the chaos, mayhem and panic that was going on outside our windows. We had locked all of the doors and windows and pulled the curtains closed, in an attempt to suggest that the house was empty of occupants and had been for some time.

Father had told us all to hide. And yet we were all sat around the kitchen table, clutching each other. Mila was mercifully asleep in Mother's arms, my brothers nestled between Mother and Father. I was sat across from them, Tristan's arms wrapped tightly around me as I gripped his hand. His parents both worked night-shifts and were still out; I hadn't wanted Tristan to be alone in an empty house wallowing in his own fear, even if it made the fact that his parents were absent more painfully obvious. I prayed that they both were okay.

No one knew what was happening, on account of the fact that we'd closed the curtains and because everything had happened in such a short space of time. The only thing that I knew were the deep waves of fear and terror flowing through me. Surprisingly, however, the fear was not on my part; I could kid myself that I was perfectly safe when surrounded by my family, still safely tucked inside our home. It was for Georgie and Karinna and everyone else that I feared for.

I jumped from my skin, Tristan forcing a hand over my mouth to mask my yelp as there was a sudden knock at the door. The very air inside my lungs stilled as time ground to a halt. What did we do? What could we possibly do?

"Leave it." Father said, his voice stern yet quiet. I swallowed and held my position, Tristan drawing his hand away from my mouth and interlocking my fingers with his, his skin flushed. Would the person simply leave? Or would they investigate further?

We were counting on them just leaving. Otherwise, our entire plan would be ruined.

There was a second knock, this one louder and more frantic. Father still remained stern. "Leave it." He repeated, but my ears pricked up at the sound of a voice on the other side, begging me to open the door. I would recognise that voice anywhere, even when consumed by fear.

I jumped from my skin, steadily approaching the door and ignoring the pleas and cries of my family to leave it and sit back down. I knew who it was, I told them, as I gripped the door handle and unlocked it. I wasn't going to leave her outside to suffer at the hands of those black cloaked figures we had seen storming the market square.

I firmly shut the door behind them, replacing the lock and breathing a sigh of relief that there hadn't been anyone following them that would alert them to the fact the house wasn't as abandoned as we were making it out to be.

I spun around, instantly falling into Georgie's arms as she wrapped them around me, squeezing me tightly. Her skin was clammy, her chest heaving for breath as I pulled away and brushed some of the hair that was stuck to her face behind her ear. She was sweaty and disheveled but she was alive. There was a quiver and bow slung over her shoulder, as well as a dagger resting at her belt, that I knew my parents instantly picked up on. Lucille was panting slightly also as she leaned against the counter to remove her satin gloves.
"You're okay." Georgie breathed and I nodded, a grateful smile slipping onto my face.

"We're all okay." Georgie looked around the room, locking eyes with Tristan for a moment and exchanging a brief smile before she turned back to me, her face turning grave.

"Just what exactly is going on here?" Father interrupted, the scraping of his chair on the concrete floor ricocheting down my spine. My parents had heard me speak of Georgie on countless occasions but this was the first time they had ever locked eyes on her, the woman who I spoke so highly of and whose close relationship with myself they couldn't understand.

"This is Georgiana." I said, my voice tripping over her title but deciding to ignore it at the last moment. Titles didn't seem to mean an awful much at the moment. "And her aunt, Lucille Mariel."

"Your Mistress?" I grudgingly nodded, meeting Georgie's eye as I did so. I never really spoken in much detail to her about the divide that existed between myself and my parents on this front, mainly because I was embarrassed that it existed at all. To me, she was simply one of my best friends who I happened to, sort-of, work for. But it was clear in the way my parents straightened their posture and narrowed their eyes slightly at Lucille that they cared an awful lot more about this relationship than I did.

And, obviously, they disliked Lucille for reasons that seemed ridiculous to me. I knew that they knew who she was, her name was infamous even if her face wasn't. I could immediately see their dislike, in their assumption that Lucille was the physical embodiment of lust and sin which was utter rubbish. People weren't sins. They were just that. People.

"And what are you doing here?" Father continued but I ignored him. I didn't care exactly why they were here, only that they were and they were safe.

"How did you get out?" I asked instead, ignoring the growing frown between Father's brows. My brothers seemed shocked to the fact that two high-born ladies were currently in our kitchen and Mother, as always, seemed to be taking everything in her stride.

"Markus staged a distraction in the Great Hall that gave me time to escape."

"He's still inside?" Georgie nodded.

"Everyone is, I think. Apart from us, and you and Tristan." Tristan had stayed remarkably quiet, perhaps in an attempt to get his feelings into order before blurring them out which was something he had promised me his was going to try to do since we had made-up after our argument. "As long as you stay inside, you should be relatively safe I think." Georgie said, looking over my shoulder to make eye-contact with my parents. I noted the wariness of her tone; she would never be certain on this fact.

"What about the King?" Tristan asked suddenly and I saw Georgie pause.

"He's still inside." Lucille started. "But we've been unable to contact him, suggesting that Estella may have already got her hands on him."

"And another thing." Georgie continued, a flicker of something on her face. "Those rumours about Estella possessing magical abilities? They're not just rumours." I gasped; everyone else seemed stunned. I couldn't believe it; she actually had magic?

But then again, of course she did. She would need some sort of unnatural ability in order to conjure those cloaked figures from wherever they had come from. The second I had seen the Lakosian nobles beginning to destroy the market, I had known that it was Estella behind everything. Behind
"Do we have a plan?" Tristan asked boldly and I wanted to grin, despite my fear and shock.

"I want to try and get the remaining servants out of the castle. Estella is largely focusing on the nobles, meaning they should be easier to reach. I want to protect as many people as we can." I turned to look at Tristan, the same expression on his face. I turned back to Georgie and Lucille.

"That's something we could do -"

"No, Lysa." Father said bluntly, my mother joining him in his displeasure. "You're not going anywhere."

"I am not going to abandon my people." I said as firmly as I could. I understood their want to keep me here but I also knew that I wouldn't be able to cope with myself if more of my friends died and there was something I could have done to help.

"Your people are in this room!" Father commanded, taking a step towards me. "I'm not going to let you run off with people that I barely know!"

"I'm not a child." I said angrily. "And besides, I know Georgie and I know that she's my friend. I'm not going to stay in here when my other friends are being killed just meters away and I could be doing something."

"It's dangerous, honey." Mother said, her voice soft. "We don't even know what those figures are -"

"Estella raised an army of dead soldiers to fight on her side." Lucille said and I felt my jaw drop. That was what those black figures were? What the hoods concealed? Estella must truly possess strong abilities if she was able to do something like that.

I turned to face my family as faint sniffles filled the air; Joseph was burrowing into my mother's shoulder, his face red and eyes round with fear. Walking skeletons. Living corpses. It was terrifying enough to make me want to vomit onto the floor. But that was why I had to do something.

"I'm not going to let them hurt innocent people." I said, straightening up and staring Father right in his eyes. There was nothing he could say that would change my mind. "We can evacuate the servants." Tristan was nodding, firmly clutching the edge of the table. "But where should we take them?"

"There's a tunnel that leads under the castle straight into the forest. That should be a far enough distance - " Lucille said and I knew that Georgie hadn't been lying when she had said that Lucille knew everything about the castle. Even I didn't know about this tunnel.

"What are you doing?" Tristan asked, gesturing to Georgie and Lucille.

"We need to find the King." Georgie said. "Estella wants to rule his kingdom and the first thing she'll do is kill him. We have to find him before that happens."

"You said that nobles are attracting more attention?" Georgie nodded. "Then you're going to get caught in two seconds walking around like that." There was silence for a moment as Georgie looked over at Lucille.

"Could we borrow some clothes? Please?"

"I don't think anything of mine will fit you." There was a chance they could fit Lucille because, aside from her larger bust, she was of a similar shape to me and possibly slightly smaller than me, despite
her commanding presence. Georgie, however, I wasn't so hopeful; she was taller than me, with a larger bust, wider hips and more curves to her figure than I had ever dreamed of.

I looked over at Mother and raised an eyebrow. She smirked slightly and nodded. "Take whatever you like." She said and I grinned.

"Thank you." Georgie sighed, tugging at the sleeves of her gown that I was certain she had been wearing yesterday. "And congratulations, all of you. Mila's beautiful."

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After picking out one of my red dresses that was slightly large for me, meaning it would hopefully fit Lucille perfectly, and finding a cream blouse and dark pink skirt of my mother's that weren't covered in milk stains, Lucille and Georgie quickly changed in my bedroom as I took my time hugging and reassuring my parents and my siblings that I was going to be absolutely fine and they needed to stay safe.

I even hugged Tristan, despite the fact he was coming with me into the servants quarters. I let him kiss me once, twice, on the lips as my brothers giggled behind me and Mother attempted to shush them.

What if something happened to them whilst I was gone? I would never be able to live with myself. But I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I stayed.

I was worried about what would happen to Georgie and Lucille; I was worried about what was possibly already happening to Karinna and Markus and the King. I was terrified about stepping back into the castle and forcing myself to look as though I was in control and I wasn't moments away from literally wetting myself.

But Georgie was counting on me for this. We had to help as many innocent lives as we could and I could continue to be terrified as long as I helped people at the same time.

I had to this. Georgie, with her confidence and her compassion and her relentless drive, made me brave. Now I had to actively use that bravery for something that was bigger than myself.

***

Everything had seemed to pass by in a blur; I was sure that my hands were still shaking and yet I had forced myself to keep going, to keep my voice calm and keep my chin high. So far, we were all still alive.

Tristan and I had somehow managed to sneak our way back into the kitchens, baskets of berries clutched in our hands and our story of being berry-picking in the woods ready to drip from our mouths. Thankfully, Georgie's assertions about there being little interest in the servants seemed to be true and while the doors leading into the depths of the castle were protected by armed guards, the passageway leading into the kitchen from outside the castle was clear. Whoever had decided on this strategic move had clearly been relying on the fact that the guards circulating the courtyard would see anyone attempting to enter the castle.

But Tristan and I had had a lot of experience hurtling around the courtyard, attempting to hide ourselves from the gaze of Mrs. Boweson, as we arrived late for a shift.

Tristan had then, rather artfully, knocked out the single guard who had entered the kitchens by hitting him over the head with a jug and then, after calming the remaining servants and hugging those who I was particularly close with and had thought that I might never see alive again. Now, we were steadily leading group after group of servants down the secret passageway that Lucille had pointed
out to us, a sigh of relief leaving my lungs with every second that passed that we weren't caught.

As much as I wanted to send every single servant away at once, I had to suppress this; we would surely draw far too much attention that way and we would instantly ruin the plan that Georgie had set into motion. I was hoping that, seeing as nobody seemed to be particularly worried about the servants, that by the time someone did open the kitchen doors, the room would be vacant.

That was what I was hoping for, anyway. That was what I was praying for.

I was currently working on gathering supplies, raiding the kitchen cupboards for any food that would be able to be packed up into baskets and carried into the forest with the leaving servants, as Tristan organized the next group. We didn't know how long they were going to be spending in the forest - how long this whirlwind was going to go on for.

It still didn't seem real, even though I was packing supplies and helping my fellow servants to evacuate the kitchens from Estella's grip. Georgie had pulled me aside before we had separated, warning me to be wary if I came across Estella or any of the Lakosians because they may also possess magical abilities. If that reassured me in any way, shape or form...

I sighed, looking up and locking eyes with Tristan for a second before I turned back to the apples that I was piling into a basket. As long as we kept our wits and our courage then we would be fine. Maybe. My courage kept wavering anytime I thought about the consequences of what was happening but Georgie was sticking her neck out - Georgie was going to look Estella straight in the eyes and not move - so I could do the same. I would have to do the same.

Tristan dispatched the next group of servants down the passageway, armed with resources and blankets. He had been busy figuring out who would be the best to have in the forest and who they needed to stay, whose skills would be the most useful there and here. It was kind of amazing just watching him think and plan and how he rarely seemed to get flustered - aside from when we argued but I was willing to temporarily forget about that whole, semi-resolved, situation.

Once Estella was dealt with, we would be able to fully talk out our problems and he would kiss me silly and everything would be perfect again. I never really wanted to make excuses for people's actions but the fear and stress that had been pressing down on everybody had been making many people behave irrationally.

"Hey - " I looked up and smiled, meeting his tired green eyes and resisting the urge to reach over and take his hand or kiss him. There simply wasn't time for that.

"Hey - "

"So, I've been thinking about when you should leave..."

"What?" I narrowed my eyes slightly.

"You need to get out of here too, so you'll be safe."

"No." Tristan opened his mouth to speak but I reached over and took his hands, cursing my previous thought. "That's not happening, Tristan."

"There's more people to miss you." Tristan said quietly and I felt my eyes widen. "You have your siblings - "

"You're speaking like a fool." I interrupted gently, stepping closer to him and wanting to brush his lips with mine. He could be so stubborn and kind-hearted simultaneously that it almost made me
want to hit him sometimes. And yet, he seemed so determined, so sure that I should leave and he should stay that it was almost endearing the softness in his expression. "I'm going nowhere, not while you and Georgie and everyone else are still inside."

"I'm really, really sorry about earlier." He murmured gently, his fingers sliding across mine as his eyes turned sincere.

"I know. It's okay."

"I love you." I leaned forward, resting my forehead against his as he gently moved his hands to curl into my hair.

"You're the sweetest and most the loyal guy in the world." I said, smiling, and watching him blush slightly. "And definitely the most handsome. And I love you too."
Chapter 53

The silence was painful. The looks of resignation on the faces around me was painful. The dull throb of my cheek, from when I had collided with a guard's fist during the fight was painful.

The only thing that was blissful was the fact that Georgie had managed to escape. Now, I just had to pray that she was unhurt and uncaptured and was working on some form of plan on what could be done to stop Estella. I was compiling countless possible ideas in my head, all of them impossible to complete while trapped inside a hall.

But Georgie's assertion to try and fix the situation would only put her in more danger.

Not that she was the only one in danger; we were in trouble too. Estella clearly hadn't appreciated our outburst - an understatement I would never be able to fully explain - and now I was afraid to do much more than breathe. The Lakosian guards seemed intent on punishing even the slightest movement, whether a nod of the head or wink of an eye, and I was trying to keep myself as non-descript as possible to remain under their radar.

Keeping my eyes fixed in front of me was harder than I had anticipated but I was entertaining myself by running over the scenes of the fight in my head. The look of fury that had graced Estella's face when she realised that it was Georgie flying out of the doors was worth the injuries that I had sustained in keeping a guard away from her. She was worth much more than a bruise to my face; so were the lives of everyone around me.

Estella's fury was not to be disregarded, however. As soon as control of the hall had been resumed and the rebels - including Markus - knocked to the floor, she had forced the two lords closest to her to rise to their knees and forced their own daggers that had been in their hands moments ago through their stomachs.

Their groans of suffering were still reverberating around my skull, even though their bodies had long grown quiet. Estella had barely seemed to react, dropping the daggers to the floor with whatever invisible force she had been using to hold them. The silence in the room had seemed to grow even starker, the realization dawning on everyone in the room. Estella really did possess magical abilities and it was terrifying. She was terrifying and everyone was petrified of her and of what she could do.

I wasn't going to be like that. Even if the knowledge of my magical abilities made everyone more wary and distant towards me than they already were, then at least I would know in my mind that I was as far from being like Estella as I could be. I was the person who had to stay sane with my power; it was my opinion and my mindset that mattered, no one else's.

I desperately wanted to speak with Markus who was sat no more than a few inches away from me, his head resting against the wall with his lip and nose both bleeding and his left arm gingerly placed across his lap. Every time I dared to try and meet his eye, or open my mouth, then I would see the guards glance my way and I would immediately look to the floor. I hoped that my appearance - the delicate nightgown and dressing gown I was wearing and the slightly bedraggled state of my hair - helped me in this respect; I didn't look to be the one to start a revolt or the one to be plotting against their queen.

It was their mistake, really.
I really hoped that Markus had some more weapons hidden somewhere in his cloak but I knew my chances were slim. We were going to need an edge, an advantage, if we wanted to stand any chance of recreating the stunt he and his nobleman friends had pulled. I had a dagger that I had swiped from the floor and was currently hiding in my skirts. The edge of it was faintly stained with blood. Was it Narnian or Lakosian blood?

We needed to do something. I couldn't just leave an entire kingdom's hopes resting on Georgie's shoulders; it wasn't fair. I knew that Georgie's senses of self-preservation were highly tuned and she was one of the most shrewd and intelligent people that I knew but it still wasn't right for me to simply wait for her to save us. I had to do something. And yet, I had to do something without risking anyone's life or Estella's wrath.

There was no sign of the gentle, compassionate leader that Georgie and I had debated seeing within her. She now looked as though she was burning from the inside out, being consumed by her own ambition.

I looked up at the sound of shuffling footsteps and the creak of wood and saw that the soldiers who had been standing guard at the main doors and the alcoves that led off into smaller passages around the Great Hall were changing their posts. A new group of soldiers slipped into the room, replacing their previous posts as I stared enviably at the sliver of freedom that I could see through the doors. At least I would be able to entertain myself with seeing which Lakosian lords and nobles hated us all so much that they were willing to hold us hostage - or how terrified they were of their own queen which was what Estella was using to turn them against us.

The now former guards quickly exited the hall and the doors slid shut. That was our last chance of freedom.

No. I was going to think of something.

I turned to look at Markus again but his figure was unchanged. He was staring off into space, his posture completely fixed and still. His jaw was tense, his brows furrowed as his hands tightly gripped his knees. I wasn't sure I entirely wanted to know what he was thinking.

I turned to glare at the guards out of the corner of my eye, running over them to see whether I explicitly remembered any of their faces. I regretted now not paying more attention to their swarming mass; I might have been able to learn something that would be advantageous to me now.

There had to be a way out of this. This couldn't simply be the end.

Hang on a minute. What?

I had sworn that one of the Lakosian guards, who was standing beside one of the alcoves that led down a corridor away from the hall, had just winked at me. Had I confused myself? Was his eye merely twitching?

No. The guard was familiar, underneath the black and gold armor of Lakosia and the helmet that concealed half of his face. I knew who he was. The only question was what the hell was he doing here?

Why was Julien here?

Whatever his reasoning, at the very least I now knew that he was safe. And, hopefully, that wink meant he had some idea of how to get us out of here.

I looked over at Markus, subtly gesturing over to where Julien was standing. Markus furrowed his
brows as he followed my gaze, suddenly sitting straighter as Julien winked at him. He met my gaze, his expression now effervescent.

"There's no way we can get to him, though." Markus mouthed. There had to be a way. If we couldn't get to him, there had to be a way to get him to us -

"We stage a fight." Markus narrowed his eyes. "We fight and he takes us off into that corridor to discipline us. Then, we talk." I could only hope that Julien would be able to see what we were trying to achieve and follow through with the plan.

He might not even reach us. Estella might decide to intervene instead and simply slam our skulls against the concrete floor. We were desperate and desperation forced people to make drastic decisions.

"It might work..." Markus mused.

"It will work." It had to work. Otherwise, I would spend my last moments wrestling with my best friend's brother.

"Now?" I nodded. Every second we wasted was a second that could be used to help Georgie, to save lives, to claw back some of the power that Estella had wrench away from us. Markus paused for a moment before his pale grey eyes turned fierce and sharp. Was this what his opponents felt when they faced him on the field? That they were an animal about to be slaughtered?

"What did you just call me?" Markus bellowed, his voice echoing around the silent room.

"Did you not hear me? I said - " I swung to the side, ducking from Markus' incoming fist and rolling to the side, my dagger in my hand. I looked up, seeing Julien's wide eyes give way to focus. I tried to tune out the voices around me, the threat that Estella could take my heart in her hands and squeeze it to a pulp any second now. I kicked out at Markus, sending him staggering backwards as a pair of footsteps thundered over to me, hands reaching for my shoulders and dragging me to my feet.

"I can deal with this, Your Majesty." Julien. It was Julien, his hands warm on my skin as he forced Markus to his feet and held out his sword, making us walk through the crowds of nobles knelt on the floor and the thunderous glares of the other Lakosian guards.

Estella didn't speak. Did she even care? Were we so insignificant that she couldn't be bothered to even lift a finger?

My breath was racing, propelled by my nerves and my fear and those brief, few moments where I had had to pretend I was capable of taking down Markus. In wits, perhaps. In physique, I would have to try a little harder.

Julien forced us down the corridor leading off from the alcove that he had been 'guarding', a flash of relief shooting through me that I no longer had eyes watching my every move and even if it would do little against her, there was at least now a wall standing between myself and Estella.

Markus, Julien and I had could technically leave right now; all we needed to do was run down the corridor and to keep running until we found safety but I couldn't simply abandon the other nobles to the mercy of Estella's forces.

Julien turned to face us, Markus stood beside me. "I can't believe that worked." He murmured, a triumphant look on his face and Julien rolled his eyes. I wanted to ask how he'd come to acquire the uniform for the Lakosian cavalry but the answer was fairly clear.
"We don't have much time." Julien said firmly, sheathing his sword in his belt.

"What exactly is going on?" Markus asked, running a hand through his hair. I hadn't occurred to me that I knew more information that he did; he must have been pulled from his bed by the noise and then been apprehended by the Lakosian forces without so much as another word.

"Tristan and Lysa are working on evacuating as many of the servants as they can." Of course they were. The pair of them were so brave and loyalty, qualities that often went overlooked in favour of their abilities to polish boots and fold linen.

"And Georgie?"

"What happened?" Markus asked.

"We were jumped." I said quickly. I knew we didn't have time for a full explanation.

"She's fine." Julien reassured and I let out a deep breath. "The last time I saw her she was trying to find her aunt and, according to Lysa, they're now trying to find Caspian."

"He's missing?" Markus pondered and I bit my lip.

"Estella probably has him locked up somewhere. She wants to kill him; she'll want it to be a public event."

"What about the villagers? The town?"

"Our forces are working on that. It's taking a bit effort to work around Estella's undead army because - "

"They can't be killed using swords." I finished. This was what Georgie had told me; her theory was that the soldiers could only be killed by their host, no man-made weapon would be able to scratch them. And their host was Estella.

"They're searching for alternative methods but, at the moment, the most effective method seems to be trying to avoid them or simply running away." This sounded bleak, especially for the children who lived in the village. They wouldn't be able to out-run a group of undead soldiers. "I think Sternwood has some of his men researching it, trying to find another solution." Julien paused, his eyes lingering on my face for longer than was natural. "They're not as good as researching at others but - "

I felt my cheeks began to flush, my mouth turning as dry as sandpaper. Now was not the time to be getting flustered. I couldn't allow my feelings - whatever those feelings were - to cloud my judgement.

"What are you doing?" Markus asked and I was growing ever more conscious that our time was running out. Another guard would undoubtedly come searching for us soon and Julien would have to be seen to be punishing us, not discussing escape plans.

"Trying to find Georgie and Lucille. They're going to need help breaking Caspian out from whatever prison Estella has put him into."

"What can we do?" I asked, looking between Julien and Markus. Their expressions mirrored each other - panic and unease and fear. "I'm not going to leave all those people to Estella's punishments."

"If we escape, she's more likely to hurt them." Markus said bluntly and I nodded. I wasn't going to be responsible for their pain.
"At least if we're docile Estella has no reason to hurt us."

"For now." Julien added, sounding unconvinced. "Your plan is to sit there and allow yourself to be captured?" I raised an eyebrow at him. That's not what I was saying.

"Not every battle is about fighting your way out." I said calmly, trying to keep my nerves under control. I might have never been on a battlefield - not that I was sure Julien had either - but that didn't mean I didn't understand what was happening here. I had spent enough time around my father to know that it was about the lives of the many, not the few. "This is about protecting as many people and saving as many lives as we can."

Markus looked as though he was on the verge of speaking but thought better of it. I knew my plan - if it could even be called that - seemed pitiful at best but, at the moment, I could see no clear way to free ourselves without putting everyone else's lives at considerable risk. I wanted to find Georgie and help her - my desperation was physically paining me - but now that I knew she wasn't alone, I was able to breathe a little easier.

"Fine. Here - " Julien said, drawing his eyes away from mine as he reached for his belt and handed over his two daggers and pistols. I didn't have many places to hide weapons, but was thankful for the pockets in my dressing gown. "You both need to be careful. Estella is incredibly unpredictable." His eyes lingered on me as he said this and I felt myself begin to flush again.

"You're supposed to be disciplining us for fighting. It won't look right if we just walk back in there looking the same." Both Markus and Julien paused for a moment before Markus sighed and stepped forwards, dropping his arms to his sides.

"Go on. Punch me." Julien sighed and smiled slightly.

"I'm really sorry about this."

"Just do it - " Markus half-staggered backwards, the force of the hit clearly throwing him off guard as well as myself. I had always considered Julien to be more of a diplomatic thinker than thug fighter. But then, he had been brought up in the Court and would have been taught to fight from a young age.

I swallowed, looking away from Julien flexing his hands, the muscles rippling through his arms. There was no way I could possibly find violence attractive -

"This isn't happening." Julien said, turning towards me and I raised an eyebrow, folding my arms.

"Why not? Because I'm a woman?"

"No! No, of course not, because - "

"We don't have time to listen to your lovers' quarrel." Markus said, stepping towards me and rolling his shirt-sleeves up slightly. "I'll do it and then if Georgie complains, I can say that I saved your life." I nodded, slowly dropping my arms and standing up a little straighter. I didn't know what to expect as Markus pulled his arm back, Julien staring with a clenched jaw, as I almost cringed back but forced myself to be still.

Shit. That hurt.

I felt as though my brain was rattling around in my skull as Markus crackled his knuckles and I forced myself to repress my groan. It took effort to open my eyes without blinking back against the light but I could now see that Markus' lip was bleeding even more from where Julien had hit him.
"Right then." Markus said, swinging his cloak back around him to conceal his dagger and pistols. "Let's go back and start our silent revolution."

- What's more important - the lives of the many or the few? Thanks for reading!
Chapter 54

Lady Georgiana Howard

My heeled shoes clattered too loudly against the concrete floor, my thundering heart and labored breathing reverberating around the silence. It must have been a reason why Estella had chosen this room in which to imprison him; the task of freeing him was made all the more impossible by the bubble of silence circling the room. It was a meeting room usually used for meetings with foreign dignitaries but now, there was far more security than I had ever witnessed there before. Every corner that I passed greeted me with another pair of wandering eyes, another guard with a hand on their sword and their Lakosian crest glinting in the faint sunlight.

I hadn't seen their faces but just seeing those black veiled cloaks, their shadow-like movement had been enough to halt me in my tracks and force me to dig my nails into the palms of my hands to stop myself from screaming. Her undead guards were also patrolling the castle halls as well as wreaking havoc in the village. There seemed to be a never-ending swarm of them, circling like crows at a corpse. And the corpse was us, all of us.

Even though I knew that Estella didn't want to kill us, that didn't mean that she wouldn't. She had found justification in taking four innocent lives so I knew she was capable of it.

The atmosphere was thick with dread and fear. I felt as though I was going to be sick. I was approaching this was nothing but the clothes on my back - borrowed from Lysa's mother, along with a bonnet - and the basket of laundry in my hands. There were so many things that could go wrong that I had given up counting. And yet I had to do this; we hadn't gone to all this effort and gleaned all this information for it to come to nothing because I lost my nerve.

I halted at the top of the stairs, meekly keeping my eyes trained to the floor as the guards approached me. I could faintly hear Estella's voice echoing through the door. Oh God...

"It's just some blankets." I stuttered, my voice shaking. "I always wash the linens and I didn't want to not do them and - " I almost flinched as the guards knocked the basket from my hands, the sheets I had stripped from Lysa and her brother's beds lying in a heap on the ground. I forced myself to remain still as the guards began sifting through the sheets, their gazes meticulous as I tried to wet my lips, my mouth drying up.

I could feel myself shaking lightly, like a leaf in the breeze. I told myself that that was simply the character I was playing, that of the timid, insignificant serving girl.

"You'd better be quick." The guard nearest to me said, his voice hoarse, and I dropped to my knees, hurrying to collect the blankets into something resembling a pile and throwing them back into the basket. I could feel their eyes on me, their frames towering over me, a pair of knees digging into my back. I had seen their smirks at my behavior, my naivety. I knew what guards sometimes did to serving girls; it wasn't wrong to be terrified and I only had to suffer through this for a matter of minutes. Some people would spend their whole lives living in fear of the consequences.

The door to the meeting room was wrenched and one of the guards pushed me inside, the darkness burning my eyes. All of the curtains had been pulled over, completely obscuring any natural light. Candles were littered across every surface, a hot glow illuminating the figures inside. Estella was stood, her figure seeming all the more imposing when coated in dark, demonic light. Behind her, Caspian was sat behind a desk, his arms tightly folded.
I resisted the urge to smile at him. I instantly dropped into a low curtsey, keeping my head low and curling into myself. I had to become the complete opposite of the Georgiana she had witnessed to avoid being detected.

"Put them over there." She commanded after a moment of silence, pointing over to the far side of the room. I walked as slowly as I reasoned was possible, wanting to buy myself as much time as possible inside the room for Caspian to realise what I was doing.

My heart was beating so fast my chest was beginning to ache. I wanted to keep my eyes on Caspian, to make out as much as I could in the dim light. He seemed to be unhurt but the shadows were hiding any scars or bruises that could be littering his skin.

I knelt to the floor, taking out each piece of linen and neatly folding it into a square. I tried to make myself as small as possible, so that Estella might forget I was there or not care enough about me to bother masking her words.

The last time Caspian, Estella and I had been alone together she had tried to force Caspian to rape me and almost succeeded. I was trying to keep my breathing steady and my mind focused. I had a job to do.

"There's no diplomatic way out of this one, Your Majesty. There's no soldiers coming for you or that girl who thinks she can take charge of everything - "

"Lady Georgiana is welcome to take charge of me any time she wishes." Caspian said jovially, the smirk clear in his tone and I wanted to blush. I couldn't react, no matter how much I wanted to stiffen up at the mention of my name. He had recognised me, then, under the bonnet and the darkness and my crumbling figure.

He had seen me. Hopefully, this meant, he had also seen my idea.

"GET OUT!" Estella's voice was suddenly screeching through my ears, fracturing the silence and calmness that had begun to settle over me, however falsely. I didn't have to conjure the appearance of panic or apprehension as I hurried out of the room, Estella's soulless eyes following my move. I scampered away, the now empty basket clutched in my hands and weaved past the guards.

I only wished that I was dragging Caspian with me. But, hopefully, he would realise that I wouldn't arm myself with a basket of washing for no reason.

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By the time I met up with Lucille in another secret tunnel that I hadn't known of - I was really beginning to question just how succinct my knowledge of the castle really was - my breathing was beginning to return to its usual pace. I thrust my arms around her for a moment, breathing in her stability and her familiar scent, before returning to the plan.

"He seemed okay. I couldn't see any major injuries. I just hate myself for leaving him in the hands of a murderous hag who I actually wanted to please at first - "

"Julien's in the Great Hall." Lucille said, her voice quiet as she smirked at my outburst and reminding me that the tunnel we were hiding in wasn't wholly impenetrable. While my mission had been to infiltrate Caspian's prison, Lucille's had been to locate Julien. She hadn't told me which of the secret passageways she had used to obtain this information but there wasn't time right now. "He's dressed as a Lakosian guard."

"That's actually genius." I'd told him to check on Karinna and Markus, without any real idea of how he was going to achieve this.
"And he's glaring at Markus, which seems perfectly acceptable. He seems fine, aside from a bloody lip and a probably fractured arm - "

"Karinna?"

"She's fine too." I nodded, feeling a wash of relief. I had hated leaving her alone in that room, that prison that had stank of dread and despair - "Julien did seem to be looking rather annoyed with them both which is a sure way to have his cover blown but - " Her voice cut off as riotous yells began to echo from somewhere beneath us, both triumphant and desperate.

Lucille sighed, tugging at the blouse that was slightly too small for her. "That will be what Julien was glaring at them for. No doubt he disapproves of whatever stunt Markus is currently pulling - "

"We need to go and help them." If this was our only chance to get Karinna, Markus and Julien free from the Hall and from Estella's gaze, then I was going to take it.

"We need to keep our heads down so we don't get caught."

"If we do this, we've got three more people on our side. We've also got three more people safe. So far, we have a plan that is sketchy at best and nothing much else happening."

"We've secured the lower part of the castle - " Lucille reminded me, her voice firm. She resembled so much of myself sometimes, with the determined glint in her eye and the force of her mind that it was unsettling.

"And who knows how long Lysa and Tristan can hold off for. They're not trained fighters, they're just doing their best like everyone else - " I continued stubbornly, holding Lucille's gaze. I had made it out, thanks to a stunt on Markus' part that could have resulted in everyone being killed. I wasn't about to abandon them; Caspian was aware of our plan. All we could do on that front was hope.

"You're so stubborn..." Lucille murmured under her breath after a moment before hurrying down the corridor, mumbling to herself, as I hastened to catch up. "Just like your mother. And your father, I think that's what drew them together...

Our conversation ceased as we stepped out of the passageway, hurrying towards the Hall in the hope that I would at least be able to communicate something to Karinna, Markus and Julien.

Of course Markus had kicked this off. He was never one to simply sit and wait and even if this was what he has told Karinna - I felt sure that that would have been Karinna's plan - there was no doubt that he had secretly been planning another offensive. I had heard his mantra countless times: there was no safety in defense as that was simply waiting to lose. I did feel a surge of pride that lots of nobles, not just Markus, seemed to be fighting back if the bellowing noise penetrating through the walls was anything to judge from as we edged closer. The nobles would stand a better chance than some of the villagers who, for the most part, had limited.

We crept closer to the Hall, my heart pounding. At least I knew that Estella would still be upstairs with Caspian so there was no danger of me coming face to face with her, at least not yet.

It seemed to be chaos as we finally reached the Hall, the doors flung open and frantic nobles streaming out of them, both Narnians and Lakosians alike, while the fighting continued inside. I didn't want to get too close, on that risk that someone would recognise me, but was urgently searching the crowd while Lucille did the same. I caught a flash of Lakosian army as someone stormed out of the room, immediately taking a right and heading off. I surged forwards, leaving Lucille to hopefully detect Karinna and Markus as I hurried after those familiar, focused eyes.
I had a lot to thank Julien for. That was, if I could catch him.

"Julien!" I hissed, running down the corridor to grab onto his arm and drag him into a more secluded space. I knew where Lucille and I had set as our meeting point and I wanted to get there without coming across any Lakosian nobles, if that could be achieved. "Come on."

"What's going on?" He sounded tense and I immediately released his arm, gesturing him to follow.

"We've got a tactical meeting."

"What?"

"I've seen Caspian." If anything would make him listen to what I was saying, I knew it would be this. His eyes instantly widened and he seemed to calm slightly. "He seems fine. He's managing to pull sarcastic comments out of somewhere, all at Estella's expense so - "

"I bet she loves that." He said dryly as I checked the next corridor for any sign of Lakosian soldiers before urging Julien along.

"She's not killed him yet, so we have to take that as a positive - " I turned the corner, wiping my sweating palms on my skirt.

"And now?"

"Now we ask what the hell happened to Markus." I said, blinking slowly at the sight before me. I moved down the corridor, a smile growing on my face even if the severity of what was going on was clear in the shouts echoing through the halls.

They were all okay: Julien, Markus and Karinna were all fine, if you ignored Markus' flesh wounds. I raised an eyebrow at him as I came to a halt, resisting the urge to throw my arms around them both. He shrugged.

"Julien punched me."

"You're the one who put your foot in it - " Julien glared, folding his arms and opening his mouth to say something more.

"You're all okay." I interrupted, taking a deep breath in the hopes that my heart would now begin to return to normal. "That's what matters." I met Karinna's gaze, watching her stern mouth break into a tender smile and I felt tears spring to my eyes. She stepped forwards, tugging me towards her as she wrapped her arms around me, lightly placing her head on top of mine and squeezing me.

In my head, I was screaming at her that we didn't have time for this, that we needed to move, that any second Lakosian soldiers would surge round the corner and kill us all.

I was holding her so tightly that I was worried about hurting her. "I'm okay." She murmured into my ear, repeating her words over and over again until I began to lighten my grip. She was okay.

"What about me?" Markus asked, a wide smirk on his face even as he cradled his arm.

"I'm not going to hug you and hurt you even more." I said pointedly, unwrapping myself from Karinna's embrace. "And also because I'm barely managing to stop myself from crying as it is." Markus' expression molded into a sincere smile at this, his eyes sparkling even though I knew he must be in some pain. I hated that there wasn't time for his injuries to be fully assessed but there were things that needed to be done.
"So, what's going on?" Karinna asked and I met Lucille's gaze.

"The King's fine." She started. "He knows what's happening in as much detail as we could give him and - "

"How did you do that?" Markus interrupted.

"We managed to get a message to him, we think. I just hope that he read it." We would have to operate under the guise that he had read it and just pray that he had.

"We've managed to secure the lower parts of the castle with Lysa and Tristan's help - "

"They are also fine - " I added, watching Karinna's worried expression. At least they had been the last time we had seen them.

"Annalie's helping the injured." Julien inputted, "and helping get people to a safe place."

"Estella wants to rule us not kill them, that's one mercy." I said. "But that doesn't mean she won't kill us." I saw Markus and Karinna exchange a brief glance. Had something happened? Something that I didn't know about?

"But she wants to kill Caspian." Markus continued. "To take his throne."

"That does seem to be her general plan."

"And she now has an undead army that can't be killed." Markus sighed and I met Karinna's gaze.

"Actually that's not true." I said and I saw his brows instantly furrow. Lucille's eyes were pinned on me and Julien was looking somewhat dubious. "To kill the solders we need to kill whoever summoned them, at least that what I've found out."

"Great." Markus said, beaming with irony. "Because that'll be easy."

"Killing Estella does seem to solve a lot of our problems right no." Lucille added and I knew that this was true. She was the obstacle that we needed to bypass to turn everything right again.

"We need to get Caspian out of that room, protect everyone who is still around and find a way kill Estella." I said, swallowing. In my head, this list seemed much more achievable while saying it out loud highlighted just how difficult this was going to be.

"Just another day then." Markus said with a roll of his eyes. I bit my lip. It was the only way.

"And how do they go about doing that?" Julien asked after a moment, cracking his knuckles and straightening up.

"I've got a couple of ideas..."

- Everything's going down! What do you think's going to happen next? Thanks for reading!
Chapter 55

Lady Georgiana Howard

As I walked away from our meeting point, my hands tightly clenched, I was consumed with the feeling that those few moments we had spent talking could be the last time that I ever walked away from them.

I knew that it wouldn't be, that those thoughts were just the pessimistic, damaged side of my brain trying to override. And yet every step still felt painful.

Markus and Lucille were heading to break Caspian from his prison, something I had initially been dubious about because I wasn't sure whether they would be able to get on for long enough to actually accomplish this.

Julien was breaking out into the town, in an attempt to channel the fleeing villagers into the same hidden passageway that Lysa and Tristan had taken the servants down that would take them into the forest. Julien would be a familiar face to them and I knew that they would trust him.

I looked over at Karinna, her steps perfectly matched with my own. We were going for the heart of this monster to accomplish the only thing that could successfully kill the skeleton army - to kill who had created them. Estella.

I didn't know exactly how I was going to proceed but I was hoping that, in the moment, something would come to mind. I wasn't ashamed to admit that I was also relying on Karinna's magical abilities. She was the only one of us who could come close to matching Estella in this department and I was looking to make it count.

"I'm not sure what you think I'm going to be able to do." Karinna said softly, her voice barely audible as we crept through the corridors. It was as though she had read my thoughts. Had she read my thoughts? Was that something she could do? "I've been practicing a little but - "

I reached between us and took her hand, her palm cool. "Then you're here for moral support for when I drive a dagger through the heart of that murderous hag." I felt myself smirk a little, even if this was no time for humour. The severity of the situation was clearly having an effect on me. "Anything else is a bonus."

I knew that Karinna had also undertaken some light defense training, at the request of Sternwood, but she had told me before how long it had been before she'd had to use any of these particular skills. I felt that, given my particular experience with Estella, I might have slightly more of an impulse to drive the dagger home.

"Whatever happens in there - "

"No." I immediately interrupted her, squeezing her hand and shaking my head. "I can't think like that or I'm not going to be able to do this." Karinna's eyes were wide, seemingly startled, and yet also focused. Even when she seemed terrified, there was a layer of strength resting underneath her skin. "We're going to go in there, deal with her and leave. And then you can go and passionately kiss Julien, or whatever it is you wish to do - "

I swore that I saw a flicker of a smile grace Karinna's face but I couldn't be sure.
My mind seemed to be blocking out just exactly I was about to do, as though it was nothing more than taking a walk. I was blocking out the fact that Estella had the ability to force me to act against my will, that she had been the focus of my nightmares for the last few days.

I would have to pray that my will to keep Estella from my controlling my thoughts would be enough. Or that Karinna would be in some way able to help.

We had been able to locate Estella exceptionally quickly. There were only two places that she would be; taunting Caspian or taking his place at her throne. She would kill him when she had the entire kingdom's attention. We had to stop her before that could happen.

We turned the corner and whatever smirk had been resting on Karinna's face instantly vanished. The doors to the Great Hall had been thrown open, the room empty and eerily quiet apart from one remaining figure. She was sat rigidly upright, her arms clutching the armrests with a glazed look in her eyes as though she was gazing at something that we couldn't see.

As soon as we stepped forwards, our footsteps bordering at the doors, her eyes instantly snapped into focus and were upon us. The bow and quiver that were strapped to my back began to dig uncomfortably into my skin, the dagger at my belt itching to be in my hands. There had seen to be no logic in hiding our true purpose for approaching her. She would have no doubt been able to see through any our lies.

Was she aware of how much fear, anger and pain she had caused? Did she even care?

Karinna and I were walking so slowly that we were barely moving. I knew that neither of us particularly wanted to approach her and yet I was going to have to drive a dagger through her.

"How did I know that cavalry would send you?" She drawled, her voice sending prickles down my spine.

"Because the real army is busy stopping your soldiers from destroying people's homes and killing them." My voice sounded far more confident than I felt as I forced one foot in front of the other, Karinna following me. Could Estella see just how we were pretending that we weren't terrified?

"I don't have time for your games, Georgiana." She said dismissively, waving her hand as though I was nothing more than a leaf on the breeze.

I dropped to the floor, any pain I may have felt from the fall disguised by the searing, agonizing pain that was consuming my skull. It was as though I had pins poking through my eyes, rocks crunching my bones into dust.

As though something was trying to claw out of her skull.

Something deafening was ringing in my ears, an unforgiving, unyielding scream that was relentless.

Suddenly the air became quiet and I slowly pried my hands away from my temples, from where they had been clutching onto my head, trying to squeeze the pain away.

Me. That had been me screaming, screaming with pain.

Karinna was kneeling beside me, her arms gripped onto my shoulders and her face deathly pale. I forced out a couple of breaths, remnants of the pain still rippling through my head.

What was this?
I turned towards Estella, her expression perfectly cool and neutral. I was covered in a sheen of sweat, tears dripping from my eyes, my throat still hoarse from my screams.

"You have a very weak mind field, Georgiana." Estella said, her voice taunting as though she was chastising a small child. "Taking control of you is like reaching through water. Effortless."

I looked up at Karinna, her grip on my shoulders the only thing keeping me upright. What was she doing to me? Was this what it would take to defeat her? The words had been ripped from my throat, my mind numbed by the pain.

"The world never did help a smart girl, though, did it? And you are smart, Georgiana. Just childishy stupid also." She tsked, her eyes cast down as I lay helpless on the floor. Her words seemed like knives, each one pricking at my skin as she spoke. She could conjure pain, not just control people's minds. She could control their bodies too.

She snapped her fingers and the snap echoed like a crack inside my head, fracturing my skull into pieces as each wave of pain ricocheted through me, my screams flooding my own ears.

This time, I wasn't simply blind to the pain but images surged through my head, flashing before my eyes. Faces merging together into one murky picture. I tried to open my eyes wider, increasing the shooting pain, but catching sight of my parents. Both of them, smiling, crying, laughing, their scent consuming me as I felt their grip tighten around me. They were teaching me to ride, their arms clutched around me as I struggled to keep my balance, giggling as the pony rocked underneath me. They were taking me apple-picking in the orchards, the autumn sun beaming down on us as I struggled to reach the highest branches, Markus running through the trunks.

The picture suddenly shifted, the pain growing stronger as I yanked at my own hair, desperate to stop the pain. Lucille flashed before my eyes, her smirk, her beautiful gowns that I always adored as a child, her sarcastic wit that I tried to copy and resulted much to the dismay of my parents' friends. Dancing on her feet, her hands gripping onto my wrists as I staggered to the music.

My Uncle. No. Fuck. The image became darker, a swirling mass of black and blue as I screamed louder, wishing the image to leave my head, the pain and the isolation and -

I looked up, the pain crackling into nothingness again. Karinna looked torn from within, the lack of control tearing her apart as I quivered in her arms. I tilted my gaze back to Estella where she was staring at me, her gaze piercing. Could she see the images swimming through my mind? Could she see what had happened. She pursed her lips, folding them into a grin.

"It seems as though the King wasn't the only man to treat you as you deserve, as you are. As an animal. A pig." No. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't see. She knew what had happened, what he'd done -

"Stop." There was a voice cutting through my thoughts, a different voice, one that seemed too far away for her to reach. "You want me, not her."

Caspian. He was stood at the doors, his sword clutched in his hand, his forehead marred with blood. Karinna was slowly rubbing my back as I panted, my breathing running away from me as I tried to catch it. He didn't look down at me, his eyes focused on the woman occupying his throne.

"You're okay. You're safe." Karinna was whispering into my ear, even though the pair of us both knew that this was far from the truth.

"I'll do anything. Just stop hurting her. Let them both go." I heard a sharp scraping of metal and
turned to see Caspian's sword flying from his hand and clattering to the ground at the other side of the room. Caspian's eyes were wide with shock, a look of confusion on his face as he realised what had happened. He might not have been aware of Estella's power when she had been controlling the pair of us but he certainly was now.

I felt the last ripples of pain slide from my head, leaving me reeling and blinking in the cold. Karinna's arms were still around me, holding me close to her and reassuringly stroking my hair that had become matted with sweat.

"You're okay. I've got you." I leaned forwards, resting my head on her shoulder as I watched Caspian start towards Estella. I swallowed deeply, trying to moisten my now dry throat.

"We need to kill her before she kills us." I whispered against her ear.

"And how do we do that?" She murmured back.

"I'm going to need your help."

"I can't." I could hear the worry and anxiety in her voice and I wished that there was another way, a way that didn't seem so exploitative of the abilities that she had shunned for so long.

"You're going to have to try." I said, pulling back a little so I could meet her gaze. She nodded slightly, the motion almost too small to detect. I began to stagger to my feet, Karinna's arms still supporting my back. I heard Caspian's boots clunking against the floor as he stepped forwards.

"Why are you doing this?" Caspian spoke, his voice slow and calculated yet the hurt clear.

"You're not a leader." Estella spat, her eyes appearing to grow darker. "You're a child. You haven't lived, haven't felt pain or suffering. You're a naïve idealist who doesn't understand anything about what it's like to rule."

"Being positive in a negative situation isn't naïve." Caspian said firmly. "That's leadership." I watched him slowly take the dagger from his belt, a long, a thin blade that glinted. Estella raised an eyebrow.

"Really?" With a wave of her wrist, the dagger was flung to the edge of the room. "So naïve. And yet, I don't know why I bother. I've got you exactly where I want you."

"What does that mean?" He stammered, his frame suddenly jolting and freezing. I had seen him appear this way before; it was the same as when he had cornered me in the alcove.

And his eyes were fixed on me, cold and void, oblivious of Karinna stood next to me. I took a step away from her, then another few steps. Karinna seemed to be a breath away from asking what was happening before she realised.

Estella had seized control of Caspian's mind and, judging from the ferocious look in his eyes and the way he was squaring his shoulders, this time she wasn't pushing him to be amorous.

I reached for my bow at the same time as Caspian lunged for me, his speed surprising. I barely had time to dodge out of the way and sprint across the room, loading my bow as I did so, my heart beginning to race.

Estella was forcing him to fight me. She wanted to have him kill his own subjects before bringing him to his knees, before making him see what he had done.
Caspian was already an experienced, skilled fighter but now, propelled by Estella’s control, hardened and emotionless, he was a machine. I cast a look over at Karinna as he strode towards me, knowing that he didn't need to run. She was going to have to do something, whether she wanted to or not.

I didn’t want to hurt him; I didn’t want to have to aim an arrow and fire it, praying that it wouldn’t hit anywhere serious and the pain would be enough to temporarily shock him so that I could gain some sort of upper hand. I was never going to keep that upper hand, however, if we couldn’t disarm Estella. That would be where Karinna came in.

He managed to dodge most of my arrows, his reflex speed increasing thanks to Estella’s control, and even managed to catch one of them, crushing it to splinters in his bare hand and sending me reeling. I wasn’t attacking here, even if I felt as though I was. I didn’t stand a chance and there was no use in running - I would be the one wasting my energy, Caspian would simply be warming up.

He waited until I had fired my last arrow to strike, wrenching the bow from my hands as I kicked out at him, sending him jolting backwards. The skirt that I had borrowed from Lysa’s mother might be lighter than the gowns I was used to but still constricted my movement far more than Caspian’s attire did him. This was another complaint I had about the expectations for women to wear dresses and another fury that I wanted to swear as Caspian righted himself, his eyes blazing.

His punches and kicks were relentless and even the ones I managed to dodge would take precious amounts of energy from me. I was faintly aware of Karinna speaking across the room but was more concerned about dodging and blocking Caspian’s relentless attacks and masking the pain that bloomed through my torso whenever he secured a hit. There was no remorse, no feeling on his face as I let out a whimper of pain. He just kept fighting and what I needed him to do was to fight Estella, not me.

"You can fight her, you know." I said breathlessly, ducking under his arm to secure another kick to his chest. "You can block her out so she can't control you anymore. Tell her to piss off out of your head - "

I managed to hit him across the face, sending him sharply backwards as he clearly hadn't been expecting this. My ribs and lungs were both burning but I managed a look across the room at Estella whose eyes seemed solely focused on Karinna. I didn't know what she was doing but there was a defiance in her eyes as she stared back at her, her arms gripped tightly. I didn't know how strong Karinna’s powers were exactly but whatever she was doing seemed to be keeping Estella from controlling her mind and that was what I needed.

Caspian secured a few more hits before slamming me into the wall. I could feel blood trickling from a cut on my forehead, pain blooming throughout my ribs and torso as I slowly turned to face him. He looked almost smug as he stared back at me and I used this moment to storm forwards, kicking his legs out from underneath him and sending him onto the floor in a heap.

My bow was resting on the next to Caspian and, while he was still lying dazed on the floor, I grabbed it and held it against his neck, locking his head against the floor as I straddled him. I could feel my heart pounding inside my chest, my breath coming out in gasps.

"This isn't you." I said through gritted teeth, it taking all of my effort to keep his head locked into position, to keep my knees locking his hips to the floor and to stop myself from pulling away from him, the position I was in causing the hairs on my arms to stand on end. "I know it isn't."

"Yes, it is." He said hoarsely as I jammed the bow down further against his throat. I hoped that the pain may be able to pull him away from Estella's control, to allow him to realise who he was and just what was happening.
"No, it isn't, because I know that you wouldn't hurt somebody who was trying to help you." I forced myself to meet his gaze, squeezing my knees tighter as I tried to ignore the throbbing pain inside my head, the blood that I knew was trickling down my face, the burn of the bruises that lay across my skin.

I wouldn't be able to take much more of this, much more of him like this.

"Push her out." I murmured, readjusting my grip on the bow that was pressed against his throat. "Tell her no."

A whimper forced my gaze across the room and I looked up to see Karinna, tears rolling down her face, glaring up at Estella, her eyes still haven't having lost that determined, fierce look. Estella's mouth had cracked into a smirk, her hand hovering in mid air.

"I confess: I did not see this situation coming. The dutiful daughter is actually what everyone is so afraid of, the monster everyone is trying to destroy." I felt my blood run cold. She knew, she knew about her ability. "Your mind is stronger, honed like steel. Not like your friend. You've pushes me out - "

"Karinna!" I yelled, putting as much weight as I could bare onto the bow as Caspian began to thrash under me, his hands reaching for me. "Get him out!"

"I can't!"

"Please!" I begged, knowing that with the strength I was pushing down with now I had to be cutting off some of his air. He was still fighting against my grip as I pressed almost of my entire body weight onto the bow in an attempt to keep him restrained. "Please." I sounded pitiful, my voice quiet and whispering. "I need you." I met his eyes, eyes that I had long stared at from the fringes of the room. "Not this, not this machine that you've been turned into. You, Caspian. Please."

Tears of exertion were beginning to well in my eyes, my body realising that my energy levels were running dangerously dry. If Caspian wasn't on our side, we might as well begin digging our graves now. There would be no hope. Nothing. Estella would have won.

"Please."

His struggles suddenly ceased, his movements growing still as he stared up at me. His grip on my body seemed to loosen a little, his eyes softening, his breath slowing. I felt myself smile as I watched him squeeze his eyes tight before opening them again, crinkling into a smirk.

"Are you alright?" I murmured, becoming painfully aware of the position I was in. He nodded, his eyes skimming over my body to the floor. I was still straddling him, the metal of his belt pushing uncomfortably into the skin of my thighs. From the way I had been sitting in an attempt to push all of my body weight onto his neck, his eyes were now level with my cleavage, the fabric straining at my movement to the point where I was dangerously worried about how low the neckline was. The blouse had obviously been styled for a smaller-chested woman.

"What's going on?"

"Everything's gone to shit." I said bluntly, not knowing how much of this night he would remember. "And right now, we need to kill Estella. And you need to help us."

Estella let out a sudden groan of pain and my head whipped up; Karinna was holding her hands out in front of her, her eyes burning. I had never seen such aggression, such strength so clearly ebbing out from her.
"I have no idea what I'm doing, Georgie!" She yelled, as I self-consciously pushed myself to my feet and reached out to take Caspian's hand. Whatever Karinna was doing, whatever power she was managing to conjure in her hands, it was working. Estella was no longer sitting proudly on the throne but was clutching at the arm rests, her mouth half open in pain.

"You're all children." She groaned, her voice low as she doubled over, her eyes shooting daggers towards Karinna's outstretched hands.

"Whatever it is, it's working!" Caspian seized his sword that had been lying disused at the side of the room and I picked up my bow, collecting the arrows that hadn't been completely destroyed. In my core, I was beginning to feel a flicker of something, something that had been struggling to fight through the pain.

Hope.

There was hope in Karinna's hands, in her hands that contained a power that people feared but should relish. There was hope in the bow that I held in my hands, the glow of the moonlight across the floor, the lingering heat of Caspian on my skin -

I collapsed to the floor, my screams dying in my throat as I roared. The pain was worse this time, every bone in my body feeling as though it was cracking simultaneously. My fingers were digging into the floor so tightly that the bare bones of my knuckles were protruding through. I was going to be sick. I was going to die. I was going to -

Images began to flash before my vision, the pain becoming numbed as I picked up on the face that was being shown to me, the face that was being replicated from my worst memories, my nightmares, my waking dreams.

It was Uncle, his broad smiling face at our dinner table, teaching Markus how to track and kill animals, commenting on every dress I ever wore. His clammy hands, the cold glint of his eye that only I ever saw. The pain, bloody and deep, the humiliation and the burning shame and the pain and the red of his mouth -

"How interesting." Estella crowed, staggering to her feet as Karinna began to moan slightly. "Who would have thought such carnal desires existed?"

She knew. I could tell by her smile that she knew. But Caspian, the man who was crouched next to me and screaming at Estella to stop, didn't know. Karinna didn't know. And that was how it would stay.

"Stop! STOP!" I couldn't hear my own voice above the pain shooting through my skull and reverberating through my body, every joint beginning to snap and every muscle pulse as I writhed on the floor, searching for some sort of release.

This was how I died: racked with agony, screaming for mercy as I relived every nightmare that I had ever had inside my head, over and over again in excruciating detail.

"Make it stop." I cried, begging for something that I knew wouldn't come. I couldn't lift my head up to look into Caspian's eyes or Karinna's, the last people I would ever see, my skull squeezed to a pulp in the palm of an evil queen who wanted revenge for her people, wanted justice and safety and for her torment to stop.

Something I would never have.

I slumped to the floor, the images suddenly fading, the tightness in my legs and my stomach and my
chest releasing as I realised that someone else's cries were filling the room. I raised my head slightly, Caspian's hands on my shoulders, to see Estella collapse to the floor, clutching her stomach, as blood poured from her nose, her open mouth, coating her skin -

K was ferocious as she stepped forwards, her chin high, her arms steady.

"What are you doing?" Estella growled, her voice breaking into hoarse, sharp coughing. She couldn't speak. Her words began disjointed, her voice cracking like ice as she groveled at Karinna's feet, blood beginning to flow from her ears and her eyes.

I pushed myself to my knees, watching Caspian quickly seize my bow and aim arrow after arrow into her chest as she tried to claw herself to her feet. Her face was white, translucent even, as the blood coated her chest, her arms, almost black in the semi-darkness. Karinna didn't move, her feet rooted to the spot, as her hands remained steady. She wasn't letting go, even as Estella lifted her head to stare up at Caspian, her eyes still dark and glinting in the light even though the rest of her was so utterly defeated.

I quickly inhaled as she slumped to the floor, pain still thrumming through my body as Karinna finally dropped her arms. The air seemed to still, everything turning silent, the only sound audible to me my own shallow breaths.

I blinked, the tears still clinging to my eyelashes. Had we done it? Was this it? Had we actually won?

I jolted at the sound of pain, Caspian suddenly dropping the ground next to me, blood rushing from his nose. I reached for his hand and almost sprung back in shock. It was ice cold, his face suddenly pale as stone. Oh God. No.

Estella's last claim. That look. She was determined that if she was going to die she would drag the King with her.

Something clattered against the floor behind me and I turned to see Karinna's form lying lifeless on the tiles, her eyes closed, her chest rising rapidly. I felt my breathing began to spike as I helplessly looked between the two bodies lying yards away from me.

What had I done? Oh God, what had I done?
Chapter 56

Lady Georgiana Howard

The sun was beginning to rise over the horizon, a pale yellow glow spreading out in front of me, illuminating everything that it touched. I was leaning against one of the balconies on the main corridor, my back pressed against the stone, my eyes fixed on the corridor in front of me and the constant rushing of people from all directions. I had a glass of wine in my hand that I was liberally sipping, losing track of just what number glass I was currently on. Whenever I would pass through the kitchens, someone would hand me another as though that were the only thing keeping our kingdom upright.

I had spent hours moving the injured inside to where they could receive treatment, collecting bandages and tonics and pillows and taking them to the treatment rooms, reuniting stray children with their parents, tidying the mess that had been created in the streets and praying that I wouldn't come across any more dead animals. I had been moving around so much, forcing my body to keep walking and to keep acting so I could completely overwhelm my mind, so that I didn't have to think about Karinna and Caspian.

They were both still unconscious but in apparently stable states. I didn't know what that meant; all I knew was that they were both lying in their beds and I was not. They were numb and cold and everything inside of me felt like a livewire, fizzing and ready to explode.

The manual labour also worked to dull the pain in my head in a way that I couldn't explain. Even though Estella was dead, I could still feel the pain pulsing in my skull, the tension running through all of my nerves and every time I closed my eyes I swore that I could still see the faces before my vision.

In that moment, I had genuinely thought that I might die. The pain had been of a level that no migraine would ever be able to recreate, no matter how intense. I could still feel the remnants of the pain in the very marrow of my bones and I knew that those images I had seen I would never be able to un-see. Estella had forced me to relive my childhood, relive both my best and worst memories almost simultaneously.

At least now she was dead she couldn't possibly go and explain to people just what she had made me see. No one else would ever know. Somehow, between Caspian's arrows and Karinna's power we had managed to kill her. Her skeleton army had died almost instantly I had been told and then, without their leader, the Lakosian nobles had soon began to become more pliable. Where exactly had her undead army gone, though? Had they returned to the graves that they had crawled out of? Someone should go and investigate that at some point...

I felt sorry for the guards who had to move Estella's body. I had never seen that much blood ooze out of a person. And now her body would be resting in the morgue while the Council debated on just what should be done with it.

Everyone seemed to be moving on with their lives - they were repairing their homes and their bodies and the kingdom - and yet I felt as though I was trapped in an endless cycle, a never ending loop of the last thirty minutes and I wasn't able to move on. There was only so much manual labour I could perform and wine I consumed before I had to admit that I couldn't simply brush those events away.

I had committed my time in the hall to memory. Every word, every glance, every breath that had been exchanged between us had been memorised. I knew that those moments were never going to
truly leave my mind. That was something I was going to have to deal with, later, because right now there were more pressing matters to be addressed.

I could still feel the whisper of the magic that had been brushing against my skin and it hadn't simply been Estella. Karinna's power had been staggering and I could still feel it as though it was as tangible as the wind. She said that she had been practicing - for just how long had she known about her power? How long had she been keeping it a secret? For how long had she been feeling as though she couldn't tell anyone and there was a part of herself that was wrong and dangerous?

I felt awful that I hadn't know, that she hadn't felt safe enough to tell me. I knew that was something I would have to ask her and we were going to have to have an honest conversation about it. Or rather, I would sit there and force myself to keep my mouth shut while she explained to me just what she had been feeling these past few months and whether there was anything I could do make it better. When she woke up. And that, according to the physicians, could be any time. And while they had looked me sternly in the eye when they had told me this, I knew that really, they had no idea when she was going to wake up. Her powers had been drained from battling Estella and, not only did we have no understanding of how to help someone whose powers had been drained, we didn't know just how much magic Karinna possessed in the first place.

That was something I should know. I should be able to help her when she needed it. I would help her, when she woke.

And yet a manipulative, awful voice that was deep in the back of my head, a voice that was birthed in my teenage years between my parents deaths and the days that had seemed to stretch on forever was whispering if. If. If she woke up. If she ever would...

I drained the rest of my wine glass, condemning the voice to the back of my mind. That wasn't going to happen. I needed to focus on the positives in this scenario, not the negatives.

Mercifully, the registered death toll at the moment - or at least the one I was aware of - stood at three, that being Estella and two lords that Estella had seen fit to punish after I had made my escape from the Great Hall. That was two deaths that Karinna and Markus had witnessed because of me. Two people who had lost their lives because of me.

The death count might have been low but there had been many people wounded and the next twenty-four hours were going to be crucial in determining whether that figure grew and just who exactly would survive. I felt sure that it would; the number of people who had been admitted with cuts and grazes that could easily become infected was staggering.

I had also been distressed to discover that Hestia had been admitted with a stab wound to her arm, after helping to evacuate one of the near-by orphanages. She wasn't in as a perilous condition as either Caspian or Karinna seeing that she was conscious but there was still a chance the wound could become infected and I was sure that her pain must be considerable.

It was bizarre how quickly and greatly changes could occur; a matter of weeks ago I would have cared little for her injury and now I was praying that she would survive. Battle really did draw out people's truest natures, whether for better or for worse.

I also felt great empathy towards Julien - his mother and his best friend were both wounded and, as one of the highest ranking nobles who had managed to walk away relatively unscathed, he was now being called upon to practically run the whole kingdom in both of their absences. Julien was more than capable, however, and I knew that with both him and Lord Heath, the only other council member to be currently mobile, the kingdom would be in safe hands. I had often given Heath a hard
time but he was, in fact, probably my favourite member of the council, other than the obvious ones.

I had had to learn these snippets of information from passing conversation, seeing that everyone was grossly wrapped up in their own lives and their own tasks and their own concerns because there was simply so much happening. I knew that Lucille as assisting in the medical rooms - I had never seen someone be so unfazed in the face of blood and bodily fluids - and I presumed that Markus was assisting to repair the town, just as I had. The pair of them were both unhurt after succeeding in their task of freeing Caspian from his prison.

If they hadn't had been successful, I hated to think what would have happened to Karinna and I. On the one hand, Estella would have been unable to control Caspian and force him to attack me but then Karinna would have had no incentive to conjure such ferocious power and, ultimately, defeat Estella.

I drifted in between two moods of both recounting the events that had transpired in the hall in minute detail and then misting over them all as though it had been some form of dream. I didn't know which version I preferred living in; I remembered the pain and the agony in both.

The cold air had long been stinging at my skin but I had grown numbed to it. The fact that it was now early morning was also bemusing to me - one moment it had been the depths of the night and I had been engaged in the library and now it was daybreak and Estella was dead and both Caspian and Karinna were unconscious.

"You should go to bed." Lysa was stood in front of me, a huge basket of linen in her arms. She seemed to be constantly scurrying back and forth, taking the bloody sheets and bandages over to the laundry, returning with fresh, clean ones only to repeat the process and hundred more times. I knew that there were far quicker routes she could have taken to complete this task yet she passed by me every time, her eyes worriedly checking me as she did so. I shook my head.

"I'm going to head back into the village in a moment."

"You haven't slept in I don't know how many hours." Lysa said pointedly, pushing the blue ribbon further back into her hair that was piled in a heap on the top of her head, blood faintly marring her hairline. No one cared about their appearances at the present. There were far bigger things to be concerned with. "You need to sleep."

I wasn't quite sure how or even if Lysa knew that I had spent all night in the library, if she had seen that my bed had been unslept in or that when I had visited her home I had still been dressed in my gown, but she seemed determined to use this fact against me. I shook my head again.

"I'm fine." I said, even though I was in fact the opposite.

"You'll make yourself sick." She said, her voice softer and more gentle. I knew that I would, my migraine was already pounding inside of my skull and I felt myself sigh. "You can't help Karinna or the King when you've run yourself into the ground."

"Working means that I can force myself not to think about them." I explained and Lysa smiled slightly.

"Please. Do it for me. You'll feel better."

"Sleep does sound kind of magical." I murmured, staring down at my empty wine glass in my hand. In sleep I could feel nothing. I could be as a soft and lonely as cloud. "But also not, because I know how sick I'm going to feel when I wake up." The concoction of things I had experienced over the last few hours were the perfect mixture for me to suffer a horrendous migraine - physical activity,
stress and lack of sleep. Sleeping now was also going to send my internal clock into meltdown and I would undoubtedly wake being confused between the day and the night but I was going to have to try. I could attempt and sleep until the early hours of tomorrow, couldn't I? That would be nice.

"When I've dropped off this linen, I'll try and find you some food and come and check on you." Lysa promised, giving me a kind smile and I nodded. I could drop all of my worries for Karinna and Caspian for a moment. Lysa was right, as always. I had to care for myself too.

"Thank you." Lysa's eyes narrowed slightly.

"For what?"

"Looking out for me." I said simply, though what Lysa did for me went far beyond that. "Even when I have a migraine and I can't move and even when I'm annoying and in a bad mood -"

"Don't be silly," Lysa said, adjusting the basket of linen to her hip. "You're never annoying." We both knew that this was a huge lie but neither said it. "If anything, you give me something interesting to do. Now, go on - go and sleep."
I balanced the silver tray between my hands, careful not to spill the bowl of broth that was atop it or the juice of whatever revitalising, energizing fruit had been poured into the glass. The last twenty-four hours had felt like a complete whirlwind but things seemed to be, finally, calming down slightly and returning to as much normalcy as they could.

To begin with, Caspian was finally awake. Thank God.

He had resumed consciousness a couple of hours ago and after being checked and examined by physician after physician, and then allowed some more time to rest, he had been deemed well enough to eat which was a mercy to everyone, considering how vehemently he’d been complaining about his hunger. It had been an entire day, which was one of the reasons the physicians had been so anxious to examine. There had been the spreading of ridiculous chatter that the King might never wake up and some people, it seemed, had begun to panic.

Broth probably wasn’t the filling meal he had been expecting, or wanting, but I knew he would take what he would get. He had escaped his brush with death; that was enough.

Despite him now being awake and being well enough to complain about the growls emerging from his stomach, the physicians weren’t allowing him to leave his bed until tomorrow morning which just happened to be something else he could complain about. They weren’t willing to be persuaded, however, and we were all being persuaded by speak of a pay rise if we were successful in keeping the King abed until the morning.

I had accepted this challenge with vigor.

Tomorrow also happened to be Yule which was probably another reason why he was so restless to be allowed out of bed. I knew that the day would have an entirely different feel to normal, seeing the result of the last couple of days, but it was Yule nevertheless. Perhaps it would help people to temporarily forget their problems and to celebrate, if only for a day.

The main reason the King was to be confined to his bed until tomorrow was because no one really knew just what had happened in the Hall where he had been found, located as a result of Georgie’s screaming, and just what condition Estella had inflicted on him, as a result of her magic. The physicians had all been taking extra caution and even now he was conscious, they clearly didn't want to take any chances. I had been keeping him company for most of the day, glad to have a reprieve from the hectic nature of both the town and the kitchens and because it ensured that I would still be in line for that pay increase.

Providing an unconscious man with company had not been the most entertaining, nor the most exciting task that I had ever performed but one that I had done by reading some of his novels to him, if only so that some of the noble ladies who insisted on fawning over him would finally leave. Caring for the King was turned into a competition and a battle of wits, one that I didn't want to play. I just wanted him to be alright and, from the look of things, he was going to be.

My company had also been a favour to Julien, who had asked me personally to keep an eye on him when he, often, couldn't. With both his mother as Caspian requiring medical attention - and Karinna - he was being pulled in every direction, as well as having to oversee the running of the Kingdom, and had other things that he needed to be doing rather than checking on his best friend every five
minutes, even though I knew he wanted to. But Julien was practically running the entire kingdom single handedly and there simply wasn't the time.

I balanced the tray on one hand, noting the single guards stood at either end of the corridor before briefly knocking on the door and pushing it open. Inside the room was vacant, the physicians clearly accepting that, at the moment, the King seemed to be functioning just fine. He had been unconscious for nearly twenty four hours and I didn't think the King's chambers had been completely void of physicians for that entire time. Thankfully, there hadn't been a plague outbreak somewhere and their skills could be utilised here.

"You've been allowed to eat." I said, closing the door behind me and noting the look of excitement that crossed his face as he focused on the tray in my hands. "But slowly. We don't want you throwing the whole thing up afterwards - "

"Thank you." Caspian said, barely pausing for breath before he reached for one of the slices of bread that had been provided on the tray. "And you can go, if you wish. Some people have been spending all their time examining me and I know that the must be wanting to spend that time with their own families, especially this time of year."

"It's fine," I promised, settling into the armchair that had quickly become my favourite around the chairs positioned around his grand, four-poster bed. "My parents understand what I'm doing and I'd rather be here being useful than sat at home doing nothing. Yule happens every year but watching you eat broth doesn't." Caspian shot me a smirking glance before biting off a hunk of bread and I felt myself grin. I hadn't felt like smiling for most of the last twenty four hours. It made a welcome change.

"Speaking of Yule, is the ball still happening?" The Yule Ball was an annual, and hotly anticipated, event but I was sure that exception would be able to be granted in circumstances such as they were.

"The Chief Physician is checking on me tomorrow to make a judgement but I feel fine." He said, pausing as he held the spoon to his lips. "So I don't see why not."

"Good." The Yule Ball was a chance for me to spend time with Lysa, and my other friends, all under the guise of working and serving wine to nobles. There was silence for a few moments as I allowed Caspian to hungrily start on the watery broth that I was sure was supposedly filled with good and healthy ingredients before he looked over at me, a more sincere and worried expression on his face.

"How is everyone?" Everyone was a relative term but I knew what he meant. "Really. I don't want the diplomatic answer and you don't need to spare me details because I need to care about myself first like everyone's been saying. I want to know." He was so stubborn, like many other people I could name. That was one of the reasons why we got on so well.

"Two lords were killed, Grosvenor and Wellyn, but that's all who have died, fortunately. Aside from the obvious." I added, knowing that he had already been reminded of what had happened when his mind had still been a little hazy.

"I'm glad I considered Julien's archery advice." He said with a wry smile. Everyone knew that the King was adept at almost every style of fighting but everyone also knew that Julien's skills with the bow were unparalleled.

"You can thank him when you see him." I said, knowing it would only be a matter of time before he returned, his friend now awake.

"How's his mother?" He asked, his eyes cautious and tentative.
"Much better. She's also been put on bed arrest because they don't want her tearing her stitches out. The wound was quite deep I've heard but it should heal perfectly in time. She lost quite a bit of blood so she's weak - that doesn't mean she's been easy to keep in bed though." I said, aware of the poor maid who had been tasked with that position.

"Who else?"

"Karinna is still unconscious," I said, knowing that Lysa had been spending as much time as she possibly could with her, as had Georgie and her father who had barely left her side.

"What have the physicians said?"

"They've tried everything they can think of." I said slowly. Her condition seemed to be much the same as how Caspian had been, only he had regained consciousness and she had not. "Now it's just a matter of waiting and seeing what happens."

The fact that Karinna possessed magical abilities had somehow managed to circulate its way throughout court and I knew that someone had already discussed this with Caspian, though it had seemed pointless in many ways. He had been inside that room with Georgie and Karinna; he knew what powers she possessed. It had been starling at first, almost impossible to believe but it was also plausible; she never would have admitted to having such abilities because she would have known how people would react. Her intelligence wasn't to be undervalued.

I frowned slightly as Caspian paused, his spoon still resting in his hand. His expression had turned serious, a look that I knew all to well. In a moment, if given his own way, he would be jumping from his bed and rushing off on some noble quest to rouse Karinna or inspire the people. I knew him too well and I wasn't going to let that happen.

He needed to rest and recuperate because, despite his claims, he still looked a little peaky. And besides, I wanted that extra handful of coins. Our roof had been leaking for days now and I was fed up of constantly emptying buckets of rainwater.

It was time to lighten the mood, hopefully distracting his mind from whatever task he was considering taking part in.

"Georgiana's come to visit you a few times too, you know." I said, crossing one leg over the other as I leaned back in my chair. I knew that some of the physicians had filled him in on any important diplomatic developments but no one had made him aware of the lady clamoring at the door, asking whether he had regained consciousness yet.

"Is she alright?" He asked, his face changing slightly as he looked back down at his broth. I nodded. "She has something of a migraine but she was expecting that. Other than being a little shaken up, she seems perfectly well." I had seen pale, almost haunted expression with my own eyes yesterday, when she had come to check on his progress before returning to her own chambers to sleep. Lysa had assured me that today she was looking, and feeling, much better. She had been out of her chamber a couple of times, followed closely by her brother.

This information instantly made him sit a little straighter in his bed, probably subconsciously so he didn't even acknowledge it. I rolled my eyes. He really was oblivious, as was she. I was going to have to say something. The man had almost died and if that didn't prompt either one of them to admit their feelings then nothing ever would and they would both be going round in circles for the rest of their lives. It was infuriating to watch; I couldn't keep the poor man in the dark for ever.
"You really don't know, do you?" Caspian frowned, placing the now half-empty glass down on the tray.

"Don't know what?" I sighed, looking down at my hands.

"She's going to kill me." I murmured, knowing that it was probably true. "But to hell with it." If I had to go another day hearing Georgie's lament at how gorgeous Caspian was without her saying something, then I was going to snap. "She has a thing for you."

"Who has a thing for me?" The man looked so confused that it was almost laughable.

"Georgiana. Georgie." He didn't react for a moment, his mouth hanging open. It really was commendable how blind a man could be to his own feelings. I had seen the way he looked at her, the way he'd danced with her, the way he defended her against naysayers. "You're seriously saying you had no idea?"

He remained silent, looking down at the cuff of his shirt that was now slightly stained with broth. He didn't seem particularly excited, certainly not the way I would have expected a man to act in discovering the woman he harbored feelings for was fostering the same identical feelings. It was not the way I had reacted when I'd discovered how Lysa felt about me.

"A thing for me? What do you mean, a thing?" I rolled my eyes and resisted dropping my head into my hands. What did he think I meant?

"You'll have to clarify that with her tomorrow." I said firmly, figuring that putting words into Georgie's mouth probably wouldn't be the best way to avoid myself getting slapped. "But, guessing from what Lysa's told me, she wouldn't totally object to you passionately kissing her and taking her on whatever romantic escapade you would devise for the lady you were courting." Caspian instantly blushed and looked away from me, his eyes skirting towards the window.

I knew Caspian, better than I wanted to admit. He was one of the biggest romantics I had ever met, as well as one of the shyest. This was a lethal combination.

"You're not teasing me?" He finally said, his eyes wide and sincere. I shook my head.

"Of course not." I might have a sarcastic streak but I would never play with someone's emotions like that, certainly not someone was compassionate and thoughtful as Caspian.

"She really - feels something?" I nodded again.

"You need to have more confidence in yourself." I said, with a slight smirk. "You're clever, thoughtful, a good leader, devastatingly handsome if her words are anything to go off - " He rolled his eyes, his smile increasing as I pushed myself out of my chair, figuring I should give him some privacy to think.

"I'll go and get you another drink." I said, gesturing to the glass that he had drained. "I have strict orders to keep you hydrated." I mad a start for the door.

"Tristan -"

"Yes?" I turned back to look at him, watching the considering look that was on his face.

"Do you think you could do something for me?" I raised an eyebrow and folded my arms. That was my job description so..."Some of the shops in the market will still be open at this time, right?" I would be cutting it fine but I would be able to make it.
"I'd have to run and say it was a special order for the King but probably. Why?"

"I want you to get some things for me."

- FINAL CHAPTER ALERT! What do you think of all that's happened? Will Karinna wake up? Will Georgie and Caspian confess their feelings? Thanks for reading!
Chapter 58

Lady Georgiana Howard

I adjusted the straps of my dress, tugging them slightly further down my shoulders. The Yule Ball might be a celebration of all that had been achieved in the year and the prosperity that was to come but, like most events that occurred within Court, the scrutiny from other nobles became almost unbearable. I knew that rumours surrounding the role I had played in Estella's death would undoubtedly have circulated and I didn't want my appearance to be another facet of gossip.

Thankfully, my migraine had thinned out into almost nothingness. I was going to have to be alert and focused, not dazed and blinking back against the light.

Lysa had helped me to dress earlier before dashing off to the kitchens to help with preparations. I still didn't think that the servants should be allowed to work on Yule - the nobles were more than capable of pouring their own wine and cutting their own cake - and even Lysa's insisting that they were paid almost double their regular wage didn't soothe me completely. She had come in this morning to force me out of bed and to watch me open my presents before returning to her family and now she was back. It didn't seem fair.

The dress I was wearing was one that I had debated on but Lysa had insisted was beautiful and would make me stand out because few people tended to wear yellow. But wasn't that a sign?

The dress was floor-length with off-the-shoulder lace straps, a low fluted neckline and a skirt made up of many layers of light gold net and lace, the whole garment decorated in ornate gold beadwork and embroidery. It was far different to the gowns I normally wore - I tended to wear darker shades of purple, red and navy - but Lysa had insisted that, with my hair tumbling down my back and decorated with pearls and combs of gold, I looked like a fairy.

I would take that compliment.

The whole day had been something of a blur and, for once, that wasn't on account of the pain hammering away in my skull for most of it. I had spent the majority of the day with Markus and Lucille, something that I hadn't thought would ever happen but had vastly enjoyed nevertheless. We had had lunch together, a rather chaotic affair as the kitchen staff had prepared all of the food in advance so that the nobles could help themselves which had ended in many a squabble over the best portions of meat, before taking a long, leisurely walk around the grounds.

I had been surprised that Markus had even agreed to dine with Lucille and even more so about his jovial attitude and the velvet gloves he had bought her. I would have forced him to eat with her even if he had refused but the fact that he had been so compliant and pleasant had made me smile even more. Our conversation had, naturally, drifted onto Estella for a few moments and I had had to bite my tongue in order to keep myself from telling what happened between Estella, Caspian and I. I would tell them some other day; I hadn't wanted to destroy the light-hearted mood.

My mood had all been hinging on Karinna's wellbeing now that Caspian had woken yesterday afternoon and, mercifully, I was informed that she had woken in the early hours of the morning and was now stable. I had been to visit her several times throughout the day, despite her urges that I should be spending the day with my family, and had been glad to see her looking a little brighter and even more glad to see Sternwood at her side whenever I visited. She was still fairly weak and her body exhausted but she was awake and speaking and smiling and that was all that mattered. The
physicians were dubious as to whether she would be able to attend the ball but I would be able to bypass a night of her company just to have her in my life.

She had told me rather firmly than of course she would be attending the ball because, while she knew she should rest, she had had enough of resting and having people treat her as both a fragile porcelain doll and some kind of scientific experiment. I had vowed to track down those physicians who had dared treat her like a object for them to study but had decided to allow them at least a peaceful Yule first.

In a moment where her father had left the room in search of a drink for her, we had discussed just what had transpired between Estella, Caspian and I in that alcove and how I was feeling. The pair of us had apologised profusely to the other and both started crying so by the time Sternwood had returned it probably looked as though we had been having an argument rather than falling into each other's arms.

I twirled a lock of hair around my finger as I turned to check the clock. My rose was still placed on my dining table and, while it had been wilting and on the verge of dying, it looked to have perked up in the last few hours. Wasn't that just ironic?

The door suddenly opened and I turned to see Lysa, her sleeves rolled up to her elbows and an apron wrapped around her waist.

"You didn't need to come back, you know. I'm ready, really."

"You look gorgeous." She said with a grin and I smiled.

"Thank you." Her eyes suddenly honed in onto my neck and I felt myself freeze.

"Is that a new necklace?" There really was no getting past her, was there? Of course she just happened to know every piece of jewelry that I owned. I willed down the blush that I knew would rise to my cheeks. Hopefully, Lysa would mistake it for rouge.

"It was present." I said by way of explanation, turning back to face the mirror as Lysa approached me, her hands on her hips.

"From who? I didn't see that box - "

"It arrived after you left." I said, gesturing to the table where the pile of presents I had received this morning still sat. All of the gifts had been lovely, even if Sir Dawson's sparkling diamond ring had been the least subtle present I had ever laid my eyes upon. "They didn't leave their name so I don't know. They just wish me the best for the year ahead."

Lysa was motionless for a moment, her eyes running across the neat handwriting that filled the card. The gold necklace suddenly felt cold against my skin, the delicate gold flowers and tear-shaped diamonds running across the chain tightening to constrict my throat.

She placed the card down, a shadow of a smirk on her face and I narrowed my eyes.

"What?"

"So that's why Tristan was running around the market last night. He was buying some presents - "

"Damn it." I involuntarily murmured, watching her smile even wider and feeling a smirk burst onto my own face as well as a blush on my cheeks. "He sent Karinna a present, too." I said pointedly. "It's not just me who's special."
The King wasn't required to send people Yule presents because he was, well, the King but that didn't stop him from doing so. Often, it was the members of his Council and any individuals who had done something particularly heroic or special that year. Everyone, whether noble or servant, received a card but that was hardly anything of note.

A handwritten card accompanied by a beautiful necklace, a bouquet of flowers and large box of my favourite expensive confectionary was something of note, however. It had took me a moment to realise that it had been him who had sent them and another moment for me to truly accept that it had been him, not some impostor. I had wanted to squeal. I had squealed. The whole situation seemed to be a dream.

Lysa took one look at my flushed, smiling face and sighed good-naturedly.
"Tristan told me that he and the King had words last night."

"Words about what?" She raised an eyebrow at me.

"You." I felt myself begin to frown.

"What?" My breath hitched in my throat and nausea swam in the pit of my stomach. "Shit. Why the hell did he do that? Now he's going to think that I'm desperate."

"No. Now he'll know how you truly feel." How could I possibly face him now? How could I look him in the eye, knowing that he knew how I felt, how flustered and childish I felt around him, and expect him to take me seriously? "And I've started a bet with Tristan that you'll dance with him so you'd better not let me down."

I was going to faint. No. This wasn't happening. It couldn't be. It was an impossible fantasy made true because Tristan just couldn't keep his mouth shut.

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I positioned myself firmly by Markus' side when we arrived at the ball, commenting on his deep gold jacket that complimented my dress and wondering just how he had managed to learn that specific piece of information. We were soon joined by a whole group of his friends and wine was pressed into my hands, soon allowing me to forget the deep-rooted nerves that had settled in my stomach. I found myself laughing and smiling and having a lovely time, once getting over the fact that not all of Markus' associates seemed to be totally moronic.

However, I found myself to seeking out Caspian in the room and watching him from out of the corner of my eye. It was annoying, because I kept losing track of just was having what conversation, and it was terrifying. What would I do if he came to talk to me? Lysa's bet could be damned because there was no way that I was going to dance with him. No way.

Karinna was stood with us too, having been deemed well enough to leave her bed as long as she didn't drink any alcohol and was instead sipping a ridiculously fruity drink from a glass. She definitely seemed happier and more settled, dressed in a loose and simple pale grey gown. If anything, her presence gave me something else to distract myself from Caspian because I noted the way Julien seemed to be constantly searching out for her in the crowd and attempting to come over to her, before he was intercepted by a duke.

Karinna was pretending she couldn't see Julien's glances with enormous vigor. It was commendable, if somewhat amusing whenever her eyes would meet mine.

In proof of how little I was truly paying attention to the conversation, some of the lords soon drifted away to converse with other nobles and Markus turned to face me, a wide grin on his face. I
narrowed my eyes at him, my suspicion peaking. Did Markus know about the conversation Tristan and Caspian had had last night? Was that why he was wearing that stupid shit-eating grin on his face?

"So," Markus nudged closer to me, his shoulder bumping up against mine, his voice low and smug. "Tristan got me involved in a very interesting bet and, so far, I'm winning."

"Why is everyone betting on me?" I hissed back, watching Karinna start to smile because obviously she somehow knew all about this as well.

"We're all very invested in you."

"Clearly." I said dryly, wondering just how much money Markus had been stupid enough to bet on me with.

"And didn't you say that it was your job to make sure I lost at everything?" I was sure that I had said this to him at some point given our extravagantly competitive natures but that didn't mean I now wanted to make true on that promise. I would crumble into dust if I was forced to meet Caspian's eye for more than a moment, knowing what he knew. No. I couldn't do it. "The longer you stand here discreetly staring at him then the longer I win."

"I hate you."

"We all nearly died, Georgie. That's what Tristan was thinking when he told him. Life is too short to spend all of it pining. Those reasons you tell yourself that keep yourself from talking to him are bullshit and you know it. You don't have anything to lose." My throat had turned dry, Markus' words lodging in my skin like pricks of glass. He was right. He was usually right.

I had been running from my feelings for years, in the hope that this would keep me from feeling and keep me from breaking. But that wasn't a life and if there was even a flicker of a chance where the life I dreamed about at night could come true then I had to take that, didn't I?

"You're going to have to hold my wine - " I said, pushing my goblet into Markus' hand and straightening up.

"You got this." He replied as Karinna squeezed my shoulder and someone nudged me forward into the crowd. I could do this. I could do this.

I was going to die of embarrassment but I would do it anyway. I was nothing if not ambitious. I could do this.

Just how much had Tristan told him? Did he understand the depths of my feelings or did he merely think I had a simple crush, one that most of the noble women had for him?

The crowd standing between myself and him was thick but I began weaving through the frolicking nobles, my voice growing sterner as I did so. I couldn't back down now. He was yards in front of me, his voice warm and charming as his whole body down to the rings decorating his fingers seeming to glint in the light. I could do this. I -

A large group of noblemen suddenly pushed in front of me, their tones exuberant and over the top, quickly engaging both Caspian and Hestia in conversation. I hadn't expected her to be here but she seemed as confident and commanding as ever, her long-sleeved black gown hiding whatever injury she had sustained during the fight.

Fine. I could wait for my chance. I could be patient.
"Lady Georgiana?" That was Julien's voice. I whipped around to see him approaching me, a friendly smile on his face, closely followed by the King himself. God, he was so handsome. I couldn't -

"Would you care to dance with me?" The air around me suddenly seemed to heat as I wanted to shrivel under his intense gaze. He was wearing his long claret jacket with the gold trim - my favourite of all his attire - and a rich purple shirt and I could feel his eyes resting on the necklace draped around my neck. I hadn't worn it because I had felt compelled to show off how I could be bought by the King but because I had thought it a beautiful piece of work. Would I have to make that clear?

"Yes." My answer was obvious inside my head, every single fiber in my body knowing what answer I wished to give. I wouldn't allow fear of the future or the past to control what I know did in the present. "Yes, I would."

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The air blew cold against my face, cooling my flushed skin as I looked out onto the horizon, my fingers fiddling with the bracelet looped around my wrist. I had needed some fresh air, not only to banish the dulling pain I could feel growing in my head but to calm myself down also.

According to Markus I had been dancing with Caspian for over an hour, though to me it had felt to be mere minutes. My mouth was still aching from smiling and I had felt something inside of me was going to combust with happiness. It was horribly cliched and I hated myself for it but I couldn't find any other way to describe how I had felt. It had been as though I had been filled with stardust and was sparkling from the inside out. I had been a mere moment and now I had to consider just how exactly I was going to proceed.

The footsteps echoing down the corridor startled me as I was yanked from my thoughts, the faint hum of lively music following in from the Hall. It was him; I knew it was him without even having to turn my head. A smile involuntarily bloomed to my face as he came to stand beside me, the fabric of his jacket brushing against my bare arms.

"Are you alright?" I swallowed, his voice re-igniting the heat I had been trying to dampen.

"I was getting too hot." I said, forcing my voice to remain calm and steady. "And that normally brings on a migraine. The cool air helps."

"The view's beautiful."

"It is." That was something I couldn't deny and even though I knew the sunset was the same throughout the whole kingdom, views like this one were difficult to come by in Wedgemore. The sky was often obscured by a thicket of trees or buildings and it had been one of the first things that had made me truly happy to be living at Court.

I could feel Caspian staring at me out of the corner of his eye, his eyes shining like the diamonds I was wearing. I kept my head forward, my eyes straight ahead. Now was the moment that I decided just what card I wanted to play. I couldn't see his hand but I was more than aware of mine.

"Thank you for the gifts." It crossed my mind for a moment that my assumption could be horribly wrong but I knew in the way that his eyes flickered across to me and his nod of approval that I was right.

"You're very welcome." Had he asked Lysa as to what my favorite chocolates were? I felt he must have because that box of delights had seemed far to personal and individually picked to have been mere chance.
"You didn't leave your name." I allowed myself to meet his gaze and raised one eyebrow. "I didn't
know you could be so dramatic." I wanted to address him as sire, the title slipping out of my mouth
without me even realising but I bit my tongue at the last moment.

Those gifts had been a far cry from the polite favors sent to the members of the council; they had
been personally chosen and my use of sire, my re-instatement of just what hierarchy we balanced
upon, would ruin the last hour we had spent together and the closeness that I was adopting with him.
No self respecting noblewoman would allow herself to have a hushed conversation with a man in a
deserted, shaded corridor. Not even the King. It was a good job that I wasn't self respecting.

"I heard that you had an interesting conversation with Tristan last night." The smirk slowly
disappeared from his face. I hated myself for bringing the topic up and I hated the way I began to
squirm as if my feelings were somehow invalid or wrong to be felt. The topic had been looming over
us all evening; I was being childish by avoiding it.

"I did." I dug my nails into my palms, almost holding my breath. "Is it true?

"That wholly depends on what he told you." I said briskly, my voice barely more than a whisper. I
was almost afraid to speak. This moment seemed too farcical, too unnatural to ever come true. I felt
as though I had stopped breathing, my only existence being in the pause between my question and
his response.

"That you have a certain warmth towards me. That you have for a while."

"Did he say a while?" I asked, the word almost humorous. Caspian nodded and smirked.

"Try years."

"What?" I squeezed my eyes shut so that I didn't have to look at him, didn't have to face his
expression. I didn't want to know. But, I had started down this path and I was going to have to finish
it no matter how much it hurt me, no matter how foolish it made me look or how sick I felt.

"I was going to tell you how I felt." I said slowly, a truth that I had long buried inside of me.

"Why didn't you?" He breathed, not unkindly but just confused as to why I had suppressed my
feelings for so long.

"I was going to tell you and then set off on The Dawn Treader for a year. You came back and I felt
that things had changed a little. Then, Karinna lost her mother and I had to prioritise things other than
my feelings." That was most of the truth and yet there was another reason, a bigger reason, as to why
I kept my feelings swallowed down. "And I was scared about what people would say, about what
would happen. It's easier for you. No one's going to treat a king differently because of who he likes.
There are enough rumours and names circulating about me that there becomes a point where it's just
too much and it's not worth it." I paused for a moment, wondering whether I should continue. "Even
if I was madly in love with you."

Oh God. That was it. That was it. That was the end. But, instead of rolling his eyes at me or pushing
me away he just stared back at me before he swallowed and nodded slightly.

"Tell me something about yourself."

"What?" I was so confused and my heart was still pounding from the words I had said mere
moments ago, the truth that always forced whatever decision I made. That, deep down, I really was a
coward.
"What are some things that you like? But, not as Lady Howard. I'm not going to do this as King Caspian X but just Caspian. And you as just Georgiana. Georgie." The way he said my name, the affectionate name that only those closest to me called me, made my heart begin to flutter. He was smiling, an awkward, nervous smile, as he gripped onto the marble balcony.

He wanted to get to know me. Me, not Lady Howard, and even if that was for purely platonic reasons I would be able to settle for that. It would be painful but I would be able to.

"Okay." I said slowly, thinking of items that initially jumped into my mind. "Dancing. Cake, well, all deserts really but you probably already knows that." I saw him smirk a little and continued. "Wine. Reading, I prefer fiction really. It's the joy of getting taken away to another place, another world, of living in someone else's head for a while..."

"I prefer fiction too." He agreed. "My advisors get really annoyed by it sometimes. I should be reading tax reports instead but I can't help it. I love horse riding and feeling the wind whip through my hair - "

"And I just love your hair - " The words let my mouth before I could stop them and Caspian instantly started to blush. I opened my mouth to speak but every other word seemed void. I was going to die of embarrassment. I was. This was it. "I can't believe I just said that." I murmured to myself and Caspian remained silent, his blush growing.

"I think you've made the King speechless." He admitted, a warm rush coming over me as he smiled. "Come on. You must know how people feel about your hair."

"All people? Or just you?"

"Definitely all people." I said, suddenly becoming more aware of how he shifted his body towards me, our arms brushing up against each other, and definitely stepped forwards. I was too focused on the fact that I had made a complete fool of myself, a complete and utter fool, and yet he was still talking to me. He hadn't crinkled his nose up in disgust.

In fact, he had stepped even closer.

I could feel the warmth radiating from his skin that so deliciously contrasted with the bite of the wind. I wanted to touch him so badly now that he was mere inches away from me. I wanted to run my hands through his hair and feel the callouses of his palms that seemed to be so much bigger than my own. I wanted to kiss him without promise or agenda.

I had to lift my head and rise a little on my toes to feel closer to him, watching the way his eyes darted over my face, his throat frantically bobbing up and down as I yearned to brush against his nose with my own. Did he know what he was doing to me? Did he even know what he was doing? He had to. He might look nervous and child-like in the way his hands were fidgeting at his sides but there was no doubt in the way he creeped closer, his breath on my face, his hands brushing over mine.

"May I?" I had never known someone to ask permission before they kissed someone. Maybe that was just because the only examples I had had of romantic relationships had been painful ones. Was that why I had initially latched onto the King with my affection? I had wanted a relationship I knew that I would never have, one with a fairytale prince that would sweep me off my feet rather than force me to feel pain and confusion and heartbreak.

I was overthinking this. I just needed to answer him and try to not squeal with delight.
I nodded. "Yes." He swallowed, a look of shyness suddenly crossing his face. Had he thought I would say no? That even though he had heard how I felt, he didn't truly believe that I could possibly think of him like that?

I tilted my head forwards, slowly meeting my lips with his. He seemed slow and almost hesitant, his fingers gently stroking the tender skin of my wrists. Did he mean to kiss me? Should I stop?

But, oh God, it was everything I had ever wanted; being so close to him felt like I was walking in a dream and whatever reservations he had had soon disappeared as he gently kissed me back, his mouth hot and smooth and tasting of wine and honey and -

"Shit." I sprang backwards at the sudden grunt of voices in front of us, my heart racing so quickly that I thought I was going to faint. What would someone say if they saw me kissing the King? Would they presume the worst?

"Markus owes me my money back now." It took me a moment to realise that it was Karinna and Julien standing before us, Karinna's arm looped through Julien's as they both grinned back at us. Caspian looked how I felt, his face flushed and his chest quickly rising and falling.

"Did you all bet on me?" I gasped, knowing that I should have realised Karinna would have been in on the bet as well.

"We've been waiting for this for a long time," Karinna replied, a knowing smile on her face that made me blush even more.

"And now you're spoiling it - " I said, my eyes flickering to Caspian's. I bit my lip and watched them continue down the corridor, Julien throwing a wink in Caspian's direction. Had Caspian talked to him about this? Was this just a pity kiss, now that he had discovered how I felt?

"We can try that again, if you like?" Caspian said lightly after a moment, his voice vibrating through my bones as he smirked, a smile that almost brought me to my knees. "And you can touch my hair if that would please you?"

"Shut up." His lips caught mine this time as his fingers intertwined with my own, his mouth more assured and passionate as I kissed back. My whole body felt as though it was being consumed by his heat, the silk of his shirt sliding over my skin as I reached to loop my arms around his neck. It was quick, shyness still crossing his face as he drew apart.

"You're so beautiful." He murmured, leaning forward to rest his forehead against my own. I felt as though their air had been stolen from my lungs. "You're beautiful and kind and cleverer than I could ever be and one of strongest people that I've ever met."

I couldn't stop smiling. It was impossible for me to stop as my hands gently stroked his hair, passion and joy radiating through me as his hands circled my waist. No one had ever said words like that to me before, no one who I was romantically interested in anyway. I was relishing in the way his hands felt against my skin and his scent and the soft, tender look in his eyes.

He cared about me, too. His feelings mirrored what I felt for him.

"What?" He raised an eyebrow, clearly noticing my somewhat dazed expression. I grinned ever wider.

"I feel like I've been dreaming about this moment for so long."

"You dream about me? What kind of dreams?" I rolled my eyes at his teasing tone, gulping at the
way his hands tightened slightly around me and his eyes seemed to darken. Now that look was going
to be in my dreams, his mouth, his wide hands, his throat..."I'm joking."

"This feels like a dream." I said seriously as he softly brushed his thumb over my cheek and tucked a
strand of hair behind my ear, instantly making me smirk. This was everything that I had ever wanted
and it was all right here in front of me.

"It's real. It's all real."
Epilogue

Eagle-eyed readers may know that, many moons ago, I created another series based on Narnia and Prince Caspian and while that was based very closely on the films, this version was entirely created by me and was definitely the grown-up counterpart to that teen edition. I have loved every minute of creating this world and this story and I hope that you have enjoyed reading it! A sequel may (or may not) be in the works so if you especially want to see one, feel free to lobby in the comments and to mention any specific details or themes that you'd like to see! More kiss scenes? More of Georgie's backstory with Lucille? More shirtless men? It's up to you!

In the meantime, if you want to spend more time with Georgie then you can go and check out the playlist that I have made for this story (open.spotify.com/user/abicxx/playlist/2NlrcPlg7xlY3n0DRppVd?si=BvOWwRD0Rmu_wfy67OtbCQ) or my story and character aesthetics (www.pinterest.co.uk/abi_cxx/story-aesthetics/). I'll definitely be doing more aesthetics in the future because I have many AUs planned and some other exciting extras that will be coming at some point.

If you want to check out more of my work, I've got a whole host of other stories that you can check out:

What The World Needs Now Is Love /Part 2 - Based in the Criminal Minds universe following my OC Lizzy whose seemingly normal and perfect world is cracked right open by a serial killer, the BAU and SSA Aaron Hotchner

Kindly Calm Me Down - Based in the Marvel world and following my OC Regan in the aftermath of Captain America: Civil War where every loyalty is tested and everything is put on the line, for love and her life, for a chance with a super soldier

Breathe - Based in the Now You See Me world and following my OC Margot and her escapades with a troop of magicians, a drug lord and the shady past that threatens to overturn the entire life she's built.

Thank you so much for venturing on this journey with me and I hope you stick with me to see what I have coming in the future!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!