

The twins disappeared last night.

Perhaps it will sound selfish of me, but I rather resented Devon and Evana for “disappearing” in the middle of the night. Of course, no one wants to hear that their friends have up and disappeared at any time of day, but it was first thing in the morning. That’s just rude. We were at breakfast, in the small, sunny room reserved for just that purpose, not least because it was the only time of day when we ever ate alone as a family. My sister Madison was late, as usual. In fact, she entered the room, hair mussed, eyes drooping, pajamas askew, mere moments before the breathless Two of Spades arrived. Mother, Father, and I were all already dressed in our neat red and black, and of course Madison had stumbled into the room in her purple nightdress with one sleeve pushed up to her elbow and socks mismatched. Mother and Father, who’d been talking to each other quietly, looked up when she came in with identical looks of mild disappointment. I held in a sigh.

The Two delivered his message from the Lord and Lady – or, more likely, from the Lord and Lady’s head of staff – bowed awkwardly, and left through the servants’ door.

There was a long moment of stunned silence. I wasn’t exactly surprised, in fact I was a little annoyed to be truthful, but I willed myself to look as shocked as my parents. I glanced at Madison. Every trace of sleepiness had left her eyes. She sat, tense, like she was at the top of something very tall and about to jump. I stared across the table at her, willing her not to.

Between us, Mother was tense, too. Somewhere in this strange, shell-shocked moment, I had time to take in how ridiculously *similar* the two of them were. Madison looked very much like our mother, of course, though Mother’s red hair was streaked with silver, and Madison’s face was splattered with freckles. For a second – the longest second in all the worlds – they mirrored each other: Madison, tense nearly to the point of shaking, her eyes fiery, and Mother, Queen Scarlet, looking calm but on the precipice of a rage with a gaze cold as ice. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Father brace himself, taking a deep breath and holding his fork in a tight grip.

That was a good idea.

I held my breath as the moment broke – it had to have only been a few seconds, but it felt like years – and Mother opened her mouth.

“What?” the Queen roared. “Those rebels have some nerve, kidnapping children of the royal court – I’ll have their heads for this!”

She continued in this manner, getting louder and angrier with each passing sentence, and completely ignoring her breakfast.

As she ranted about those no-good rebels and their schemes, I watched my sister. Madison was practically buzzing. She met my eye, barely-contained excitement nearly spilling over. Mother could rail against the rebels all she liked, but Madison and I knew the truth. The twins hadn’t been kidnapped. They weren’t spirited away in the night. They certainly weren’t –

“– hoodwinked *and* bamboozled by those rebellious, plotting rebel bastards!”

No, they ran away.

Which I’m sure was a conclusion we (being Madison and I) would have come to regardless of anything Devon and Evana might have said before leaving, because Devon and Evana were impossible to surprise. And Devon was being groomed to take over Wonderland’s military operations, for Alice’s sake! It was far more reasonable to presume that they’d just gotten fed up with palace life – with our parents – and run off

than that someone had actually gotten the drop on the top hand-to-hand student in her battalion. Not that any of this crossed Mother's mind for a second.

"This is an overture toward the crown, I know it!" the Queen finished. She took a deep breath, but her grip on her fork was still so tight that I'm sure her carefully maintained nails were cutting into her palm.

"It might not be so bad as that," Father interjected, since she'd finally stopped talking. I admired his willingness to step in, but then again I doubt he'd have managed 20 years of marriage if he hadn't been able to tame Mother's tempers somehow.

"What then, Darcy? *What?* Because this, to me, seems like nothing less than the rebels' boldest move on my court yet!" snapped the Queen, her volume rising once again with every word. She was practically shaking the table in her frustration.

"Dear," Father said, boldly reaching across the table to touch Mother's hand, "perhaps this is merely a scheme for ransom."

"Ransom?" the Queen repeated furiously. "How dare they even *think* –"

Madison, who had yet to say a word, was biting hard on her lower lip. I had never in my life seen Madison so – so excited. She wasn't hiding it well, either. I wanted to shake her – she'd never had much sense of when, or how, I suppose, to keep her emotions under wraps.

Mother's blind rage at the rebels worked in our favor, distracting both Father and herself from the barely suppressed grin fighting to cross my sister's face. But there was no guaranteeing that it would last. I was barely registering her words, at this point. It was mostly meaningless. I took a breath and made myself nod seriously at the end of one of her sentences.

I tapped my heel against the floor a few times, looking from Father's concerned face to Mother's furious one. Actually, this was unlikely to burn out any time soon, if previous episodes were to set any precedent. That said, even if Mother ranted, railed, and raged for hours, Madison wasn't exactly proving herself as an actress. Though she hadn't said anything yet, which was something of a saving grace. But I had to get her out of the authorities' – which is to say, our parents' – line of sight before she was so obviously *happy* that even the ever-oblivious Queen Scarlet would notice.

I began to formulate a contingency plan based primarily around Maddie being in a state of shock, even as I began to speak.

"Mother," I said, interrupting her tirade with practiced ease, "I'm sure you're well aware that Madison and I are quite close to the Ladies Devon and Evana; would it be permissible for us to retire to our chambers to come to terms with their disappearance?"

(Madison always hated how easily I could slide into the formal, fussy language of our station. She thought it inauthentic. I considered it a survival skill.)

"Yes, yes," Mother said dismissively before returning to cursing the rebels and every one of their ancestors.

I nodded sharply, stood up, and rounded the table. Gently, with every appearance of the comforting older brother, I wrapped my arm around Madison's shoulders. I gripped her shoulder hard, and used my hold to pull her into a standing position before leading her away. She moved with me, gracelessly, and but I could feel her shaking. She was fit to burst with excitement, barely containing a smile. I kept her rotated away from the adults until we were out of the room.