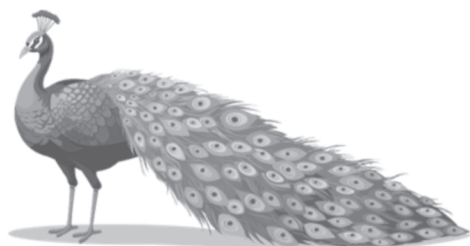


CHAPTER 1

SNEAK PEAK!



LADY JUNO FAIRFAX had long held the opinion that being a credit to one's family was the most important thing a lady could do. She flattered herself that after nineteen years of determined pursuit of this lofty goal, she had succeeded.

Today, her presentation to the King and Queen was the final test.

A graceful curtsy to the Queen, her humble spell performed to perfection, and the most delicate part of all, give no indication that the most celebrated healing family in England was, in fact, cursed.

Straightforward enough.

As though personally offended by such hubris, the screech of an outraged bird tore across the lush green of St. James's Park.

"What on earth was that?" Lady Juno drew back the carriage curtain and peered out. Her towering wig met with the roof of the carriage with an undignified thud. She winced.

"An omen?" her sister Drusilla offered with a smirk. The Starbrooke ducal carriage continued its glacial trundle toward the palace where the King and Queen awaited them.

"This is not the time to joke." Juno smoothed down the silk of her voluminous skirts. She had spelled each stitch for good fortune, and no prediction of doom from her talented sister was going to shake her.

Violet, their stepmother, and Duchess of Starbrooke, peered out the window. "Why, it's a peacock." Like Juno, she wore an elaborate court costume straight from the last century, with wide panniers that rustled with every movement. Her silk bodice had rows of velvet ribbons that hid her pregnant stomach completely.

The unholy screech rent the silence again.

"He's angry," Drusilla said, joining her to look out.

"Is there any other kind? He must have escaped from the King's garden." Finally she spotted the bird, his plumage vivid against the grass. He was surrounded by three boys ranging in age from small to almost grown, all of them well-dressed, and all wearing the deep ruby plaid of the Firestone ducal family. Perhaps they were innocently marking time in the park while their sister made her presentation—the King allowed it on these special days—but having an older brother with countless imbecilic friends, Juno suspected mischief.

"They're probably stealing its feathers, which is both bold and stupid. The King won't like it," Dru said. Peacocks were considered auspicious and their feathers a valuable gift for the innate magic they held. Juno rapped on the roof. "We must stop them."

Arthur pulled over immediately.

"Juno, no!" Violet hissed in alarm. "It can take care of itself."

"One peacock to three boys? They will take all the feathers, and you know how proud peacocks are. He'll be humiliated."

The mere thought made her shake with indignation, and

she tamped down on it, hard. Ladies did not use their power in anger. And she *especially* could not afford to.

“Well, if one falls on the ground, grab it,” Drusilla said. “You need all the luck you can get today.”

Juno reached for the door, but Violet’s hand came down, her grip surprisingly strong. “Stay in the carriage.” She touched her ring, putting power behind the command.

The will to help the peacock slipped away. *Hounds teeth, the ring of a duchess was powerful.* The purple amethrine gemstone was a direct conduit of the King’s power, given to each of the four dukes and duchesses. In the four years Violet had been their stepmother, she’d never used it. She must be more concerned about Juno’s presentation to the Queen than Juno herself.

“Goodness, Violet, was that really necessary?” Drusilla asked.

The duchess lifted her chin, regarding her stepdaughters with a tight smile. “I’m sorry, ladies, but a peacock is not more important than a successful presentation.”

Drusilla closed her eyes, and when she opened them, they held a prophetic aqua glow. “No. Juno must help him.”

“Oh no, not a premonition. Not today,” Juno said, her heart sinking.

Violet studied Drusilla for a moment, then sighed. “Very well. Be careful, and don’t spell unless you must. Try peaceful means first.”

Peaceful means with young men? How ridiculous. It wasn’t like the boys would listen to gentle pleading. And she might count herself a gentle soul most of the time, but stupid boys playing stupid games would incite violence any day of the week.

“Take your reticule,” Dru said, handing her the pretty little bag.

Juno shook her head in confusion but took the bag anyway.

Their groom, Clyde, dressed in full Starbrooke livery for the short trip to the palace, opened the door, put down a step, and held out a hand to help her alight. “May I be of assistance?”

“No, but thank you.” Juno bent low, so she didn’t knock her wig, then stepped out and studied the scene directly ahead. The ground between her and the peacock looked ominously green. Not fortuitous. With a belated prayer for her satin slippers, she took off across the wet grass.

A mage who could access her unlimited family magic would be able to ward her shoes against the wet without fear. Unfortunately, that choice had been taken from her.

The boys all had red hair, typical of Firestones. While they were strong magically, Firestones were also notoriously thick-headed. All brawn and not a brain between them. She hoped that still held true with these boys, because otherwise she was in deep trouble.

To wield power, you either needed to be noble, owning estates where thunderbolt crystals landed, to connect with their lumen, or incredibly clever to harness your natural lumen with your personal talent in decades-long learning. Usually only the rich had the resources for either.

Juno closed her eyes and connected to the spark of natural magic inside her. It was there, a band of her own lumen running alongside the cursed Starbrooke one. It was small by comparison, but it was there to be called.

The bird continued to squawk incessantly, and the boys darted about, plucking at its feathers.

She sighed. There was no way Violet was right; but she had to at least try. In her best commanding voice, she said, “Leave. Him. Alone.”

The middle one glanced at her then sniggered. “How are *you* going to stop us? You look like an angel in that big white dress.”

“And she’s a Starbrooke to boot,” the youngest one cackled, glancing at the ducal carriage. “Helpful if you’ve scraped your knee, but not much else.”

Juno looked to the skies and inhaled deeply. It was hard to believe that in a mere few years, these oafs would be considered the most eligible young men in the land. “Final warning.”

They didn’t even glance over. One made another lunge at the peacock, who screeched in response.

“That’s it.” Juno closed her eyes, feeling the gems on her ring warm under her focus. They would love to connect to her Starbrooke family magic, but they would have to make do with what she had.

Now, to find a simple spell in the Latin of her Aquae Magnus heritage...

“*Somnum nunc.*” *Sleep now.* If they felt drowsy, they would stop pestering the bird. All she had to do now was hope her personal magic was enough.

All three boys brushed off her spell as though it were a fly at a picnic. “Sorry, but we won’t be sleeping until we have all his feathers,” the eldest said, pushing back his russet-colored hair. The Firestone red gleam around his iris told her he had now thrown up some kind of ward.

Brilliant.

Then they all laughed and moved toward the peacock again, obviously relegating her to things they needn’t be concerned with.

Her eyes narrowed. *Oh really?* She hadn’t dedicated every spare moment of the last five years to bolstering her personal magic to have it thrown back in her face. And admittedly, most Starbrookes leaned into healing and soothing, but protection was her talent and if one wasn’t trying to be ladylike, it was just as impressive.

The bird ran frantically to and fro, but was blocked by the boys whichever way he turned.

Juno kicked off her slippers, hitched up her skirts, and strode across the grass toward them.

Perhaps the reticule could be useful, after all. They might be warding against magic, but not against a rogue reticule.

“Esse petram,” she spelled the bag. *Be like a rock.* Her arm sagged with the extra weight instantly, responding to her innate talent for protection of the innocent.

The medium-sized boy lunged for the bird, then raised a long iridescent plume above his head like a trophy. The peacock’s squawk was so filled with pain that tears stung Juno’s eyes. She wiped them away angrily. “Attacking a defenseless animal is despicable. And you’re right, I do look like an angel. The avenging kind.”

She swung her bag at his shoulder, making contact purely from his inability to comprehend violence from a lady. He staggered back and she followed, pushing him to the ground.

The other two rounded on her, but she swung her bag in a wide arc, smacking one in the hip. He yelped.

“Be gone!” she cried, her words choked. “Or I’ll tell the King himself what you’ve done.”

“We were just having fun,” the smallest one said sullenly, but they drew apart, exchanging worried glances.

“It’s not fun, it’s dim-witted. Especially if the King finds out.” Juno looked down at her reticule and released the spell. “Now, give me your ill-gotten gains.”

She held out her hand until they handed over two feathers.

The peacock walked regally out of their circle and toward her. He fanned out his beautiful plumage, as if in defiance. Juno picked up her slippers and together they walked back to the carriage.

“They didn’t get many,” Juno said, glancing down at the

feathers in her hand. It was almost understandable that the boys wanted them, they were so beautiful.

The peacock's answering squawk sounded like a thank you. He eyed the feathers, then her.

"For me to keep?" She marveled at the deep blue, surrounded by turquoise, jade green and gold. "You do me a great honor."

He tilted his head, watching her intently, then leaped onto the carriage wheel, and from there to the roof where he settled himself to return to the palace.

Arthur squinted up at the peacock, his expression amused. "We've got ourselves a stowaway."

"The King will be grateful if we bring him back." Juno accepted his hand and stepped into the carriage.

"I'll drive slowly, then," he said, closing the door and stowing the step.

Dru took a feather and carefully placed it into Juno's coiffure. "A great stroke of luck. Perhaps the one saving grace of the day. You helped him and he gave you a gift in return. I knew there was a reason."

It was the worst when Dru actually *did* know best.

The carriage took off, albeit at a slower pace. Peacock claws scraped on the lacquer of the carriage roof.

Violet winced at the sound, no doubt wondering how she would explain the scratches to Father. "They were Firestone boys, I think? Always in some scrape or another. I'm glad you were able to stop them, although your method left something to be desired. I only hope you have not drained yourself too much. But perhaps I can help."

Using personal magic not only took years to master, but once you drained your crystals it felt like you had wadding for brains.

"I am perfectly fine. I'm sure my outrage fueled me." It

would not do to tell Violet she had thumped them with force rather than spells.

Violet reached into her reticule and pulled out something that shimmered as it caught the sunlight. It was a tiny helmet, bejeweled with sapphires, aquamarines, and emeralds, featuring a large, seemingly pointless slit at the top. It looked ancient, and had an aura of power; she couldn't decide whether it was good or bad. Relics, the rarest of magical focus pieces, could be like that.

Juno wore three Starbrooke focus pieces today, all of them with the ancient gemstone aquaetite from the sacred wellspring at Aquae Magnus, their estate in Somerset. A gold ring with a solitaire with the Roman goddess Minerva engraved intaglio, a bracelet made of linked crystals, and a pendant around her neck. Each one of them powerful and soaked with Starbrooke lumen. Pieces the Ton would expect to see her wear and use.

And she would, but not as a conduit to the deeper Starbrooke magic, but rather to drain the crystals to the point of exhaustion.

As if reading her mind, Violet smiled. "This relic is self-powered; it requires no charging in the wellspring at Aquae Magnus. You understand the rarity. The duke and I planned to gift it to you afterward, but in this case..."

"Gift it to me? Thank you, but I have no need of such a fine gift." Juno shoved her hands into her skirts. She had never used a powerful relic, because Father's curse had arrived a week after her family magic did at thirteen. Today was not the day to start.

The tiny, jeweled helmet glimmered in the palm of Violet's hand. Its tiny gems were cut in a cabochon style, making them glow with intense color and vibrate with power. *No, madam, not today.* Although, she would have used it in a heartbeat to save the magnificent peacock just moments ago.

Juno asked in a hushed tone, "Is it from the vault?"

Only ancient, powerful objects were kept there. They were one of the reasons the Starbrooke dukes kept their dukedom. *Commoners* may go on grand tours buying sculptures, but the Starbrookes traveled to the Orient on relic-buying sprees. These ancient artifacts radiated potent energy, rarely matched today.

“Indeed. We thought it would be the perfect gift.”

“It’s too much.” She would break it or break something with it. Maybe both. Still... she reached out her hand and tentatively touched it. A bolt of energy made her jerk back and wrinkle her nose. “It is incredibly beautiful, but...”

It is for a stronger mage than me.

“It can take time and usage for an especially powerful focus piece to resonate with an individual,” Drusilla said.

Violet patted Juno’s hand. “You don’t have to use it today, but your father has thoroughly tested it, if you decide to.”

Juno nodded. But she wouldn’t. It was all too risky. “Where would I put it?”

“I could throw it into your coiffure, and you’d never see it again,” Drusilla said, a smirk lifting one side of her mouth.

“Oh, very funny.” But Juno smiled back. The wig she was made to wear was ridiculous. It towered like a beehive with fat rolls of curls and was dotted with *papier-mâché* bluebirds and ivy. The image of losing the helmet amongst the birds and flowers made her smile, even when her insides were a jangle of nerves.

Violet studied her for a moment. “Loop a ribbon through the hole and tie it to your wrist for today. Then it is there if you need it.”

“Good idea. Here, I have one.” Dru pulled a blue ribbon from her rich auburn hair and threaded it through the hole in the top and tied it onto Juno’s wrist where it swayed like a small awkward pendulum.

“Perfect,” Violet said.

The carriage slowed to a stop as they joined a line of carriages at the garden gate to St. James's Palace. Juno looked out the window, almost nose to nose with a tall hedge that formed the palace border.

Nerves leaped in her stomach. *Get in, get out, let nobody sense the curse.* Even a whisper of it could ruin them. It took great magic, fueled by righteous indignation to create a curse. A person, or house, had to do something terrible to trigger it. Father had not yet figured out what he'd done, or how to undo it. Juno had spent countless hours researching both.

They inched forward until finally reaching the gate. Steps were placed on the ground, the carriage door swung open and one by one they alighted. Juno looked around at the other equally nervous-looking debutantes and their female companions, busy straightening hair and dresses as elaborate as hers.

The peacock made a graceful descent from the roof of the carriage and walked sedately toward the garden like nothing untoward had happened.

Violet took her hand. "Come, your father will be waiting inside to see us. Ready?"

Juno nodded nervously, as Drusilla ducked behind her and fluffed out her skirts.

"I wish you the best of luck." Her gaze scanned the sky, no doubt looking at the clouds to discern the future of the afternoon. "But take care."

Violet smiled tightly. She'd never had much time for Dru's prophecies, probably because Dru's first prophecy was on Violet's wedding day to Father, when she foresaw that Violet would cause the fall of the duchy.

It was not out of the realm of possibility. By hiding a curse, the Starbrookes walked a precarious line. By law, Father should have informed the King almost six years ago when he first discovered it. That he had not was a constant source of anxiety,

like an axe hanging over the entire family. It felt dishonest, and the sooner they could end it, the better. She was doing everything in her power to get them there. With every book in the Starbrooke library at her disposal, she'd filled journals' worth of notes. Dead ends each one, thus far.

Juno glanced at her sister. "I will. You head home and make sure Cook is taking care of the celebrations. I have this well under control."

Dru's expression remained dubious, but she nodded with a sigh. "Yes, of course. See you there." Juno had hoped they could both make their come out together, since hers had been postponed by two years. But Father wanted to be as inconspicuous as possible.

Each debutante had only her mother or female guardian with her. Violet married Father four years ago when Juno was fifteen. Because she and the duke had not completed their marriage ritual, she could still access her Reynard family magic.

It was the same decision many couples in the Ton made.

The marriage ritual was one of the most intimate spells you could undertake. It exposed all your secrets and guilty pleasures—along with every weakness—to your partner; and, of course, did the same in return. In a perfectly matched couple, the result was a unique lumen that increased the power of both *and* added a heightened euphoria whenever they were intimate.

At least, that was the theory.

In practice, if one lumen was more powerful, it obliterated the other. In addition, the brutal exposure of secrets and pleasures doomed many to divorce before the marriage began, and the chances of achieving that perfect, euphoric merge approached zero.

However, by not completing the ritual, Violet had not been burdened with the Starbrooke curse.

If only *she* could do the presentation to the Queen for Juno.

Two by two, ranked in ascending order, they marched past the guards and through the ornate wrought-iron gates. Puppets on strings with their heads held high. First, girls with magical abilities, yet lacking noble birth, who aimed for advantageous marriages into the aristocracy. Then daughters of the gentry, then of earls and viscounts. And lastly, the daughters of dukes. Juno. She might arrive last, but would be the first to present herself to the Queen and cast her spell.

The walled garden at St. James's Palace hosted presentations most Thursdays during the Season. They used to be held in the drawing rooms, until one fateful presentation in 1789, when a lady from the Firestone family cast a spell on her candelabra a little too enthusiastically and the whole room caught fire.

It was late April, and the air was ripe with the scent of full-blown cherry blossoms, carried by a welcome cool breeze that hit Juno's hot cheeks. Walking gracefully was challenging when her towering hair threw off her balance. She glanced at Violet, eyes narrowing. "Did you spell your hair?" There was no other explanation for the way it did not move.

"I have poise and elegance. I don't need a spell." It was coolly said, but amusement tugged at the corners of her step-mother's lips.

"Of course. Silly me." Juno's tone was dry, and Violet's smile grew. They walked on, following the carpet and the other debutantes. Nerves made everyone quiet. These were the ladies she would share her first Season with. They would dance, flirt, and fall in love. Well, everything except that last part for her. There would be no marriage for her this Season. If only that reduced her nerves, but performing magic in front of England's top thousand had her underarms spiking with very unladylike perspiration.

Her elder brother, Valerius, would love her to marry and

subjugate her Starbrooke magic in the marriage ritual. But it would also mean giving up any hope of being Father's heir. No, she would rather wait until the curse was broken, and see if she was somehow worthy of the title. They didn't have to just automatically give *everything* to the men of the world.

A sharp squawk made Juno look down. A peacock—her peacock judging by the feathers missing in his tail—now walked alongside them on the carpet, his head held high, his entry to the King's garden needing no card of invitation.

"Coming with us, after all?" Juno asked.

"Don't encourage him," Violet said, staring straight ahead, her wig balanced perfectly and not even wobbling slightly. "We don't want him loitering, trying to save you from something so he can become your familiar."

Or do we?

It was the only way to get a familiar. You saved an animal in some way, and it deliberately returned the favor. Animals generally could not be bothered, which was why familiars were so rare. A peacock, she felt certain, wouldn't be bothered.

Another squawk from the peacock as he strutted ahead with more elegance than Juno was capable of, his tail feathers an elaborate train shimmering behind him.

The carpet led them to the private gardens behind St. James's Palace, and they waited to be seated, as the girls with the lowest ranks started to take their places in the rear seats. Juno waited, attempting slow, steady breaths. As a duke's daughter, she would be seated at the front. Before she could dwell on her nerves, distraction came in the form of hurried footsteps and a hushed exchange of voices behind her.

The footsteps stopped behind them. Juno was not so rude as to turn around, but who could help listening to their furtive whispers?

“Will they let us in?” A melodic voice asked. Whoever they were, they were unpardonably late. The Queen was strict when it came to punctuality. If you didn’t attend your presentation when first invited, no additional invitations were extended.

“They *must*,” replied another woman, somewhat anxiously. “With luck, your brother did his part and smoothed the way for us.”

“If anyone can, it’s Jai.”

“Hush. And keep your gaze lowered.”

Juno glanced at Violet. Her stepmother’s eyebrows arched, suggesting she was also intrigued, even as she kept her perfect duchess expression in place.

Ushers led the ladies toward the garden seats, arranged in rows of semicircles with St. James’s Palace, and its hundreds of windows, looming as a backdrop. Two thrones sat under an ornate marquee before the palace, waiting for the King and Queen’s arrival. The band was poised to play.

The marquee was less of a tent, and more of a portable imperial palace, with silken panels adorned with vases overflowing with red flowers, and painted tigers stalking the foreground. It was magnificent.

“Your father brought that marquee home for His Majesty from his travels in India. It belonged to the Sultan,” Violet said softly. “Personally, I think they should have left it where it was.”

“It does seem misplaced.” It was so obviously from another land and culture and did not blend with the English palace garden at all.

“I concur,” the lady behind them whispered.

Was she answering Violet, or something her own mother said?

Juno had no chance to consider it further as they arrived at the seating area.

The male members of the families waited in small groups, their solemn faces turned toward the procession and scanning each participant. A prickle of alarm skittered through her. She needed to exercise extreme caution to avoid revealing the curse. While everyone was eager to see what the first female Starbrooke of her generation could do, she would be avidly trying to hide it.

“Isn’t she modest?” they would think. Ha! In truth she was scared out of her wits that she’d expose the family’s curse.

She looked up; everyone in the garden was watching her.

“This is the worst part of being a Starbrooke,” Juno murmured.

“Everyone wanting you to fail?”

“Gracious, Violet. I was going to say ‘being the center of attention’. But failure is an option, I suppose.”

“Repeat after me. I will not fail.” Violet clasped Juno’s hand as her voice flowed as soothing as the waters of *Aquae Magnus*. She could calm a riot if she was so inclined. Which was her Reynard magic at work.

“I will not fail,” Juno repeated obediently even as she thought, *Hounds teeth, I’m going to fail*.

“Your spell is very pretty,” Violet continued, “and you could do it blindfolded and standing on a rickety boat, after so much practice.”

Nobody else *needed* to practice that hard. It would take every scrap of her knowledge and lumen to do something that access to the Starbrooke magic would have let her do with ease. “I vow the words of that spell are etched in my mind like cobblestones laid by the Romans themselves.”

A cold sweat broke out in the palms of her hands, making them clammy. Drat it, she’d tried so hard not to let Dru’s fears cloud her outlook, but here she was, standing in a line, shivering with dread and no idea how much was real and how much

imagined. One thing she knew, no matter how well she went today, they were all doomed if they couldn't find a way to break the curse.

Raphael, angel of healing, guide me.

No answering flutter of wings was heard.