Hers

By Anya Johnstone

Highly Commended in the 18-25 Age category

I always wondered why she smiled like that.

Her smile could rid the land of disease. Her kindness could tame even the darkest magic.

She was a servant. A servant who was with him, with him in a way I could never understand.

He was my husband. My King. But he was also hers.

I often lay awake at night, wondering where my King had gone to at this godly hour. Deep down, I knew. I think every woman does.

So here we were, woman to woman. I had waited for the King to leave on a hunting trip before summoning her to my chambers. Some decisions were easier made without a King in the room.

Even in the dying candlelight, after being pulled from her bed at stupid o'clock in the morning, she still looked beautiful.

I wanted to shout, wanted to cry. More than anything, I wanted to ask her what she had that I did not.

But all that left my lips were, *"Did you love him?"*

Then she shook her head.

I had imagined a hundred answers to that question. No had never been one of them.

And suddenly there were two women wondering why they were up in the middle of the night.

I studied her. I really studied her.

She stood before me barely dressed, but her confidence had been stripped. She played with the frayed hem of her nightdress. Her eyes remained hidden. She had lost that smile.

So, she risked my marriage, her place in this court and potentially her life for a man she never loved?

Heat crawled up my neck. My nails dug into my palms as my fists tightened. I closed my eyes, searching for the sweet Queen my kingdom remembered me for. When I opened them again, I could find no reason to be sweet.

I stepped towards her, the question leaving me more like a cry.

"Then why?"

Her fingers tightened around the fabric of her nightdress.

"Look at me."

Through the blur of my eyes, I almost scoffed. I *was* looking at her. Her perfect hair, perfect figure, perfect… but the smile wasn't there.

And then I saw her.

Bare feet against the cold stone floor. Hands shaking. Head bowed.

Even with her life potentially in my hands, she did not dare look me in the eye.

It was as if a key had turned somewhere in my mind, unlocking something I should have understood long before now.

I swallowed hard before my next question.

"Did you want him?"

She shook her head once more and I instinctively covered my mouth in horror.

I had spent so long believing I was powerless beside him that I had never considered how powerless she was beneath him.

He was my husband. My King. But he was also hers.

I crossed the space between us. She flinched as I reached for her, but I pulled her into my arms. She didn't hug me back immediately, almost as if she was still waiting for permission.

Eventually, her arms found mine.

She pulled back, her smile returning, but this time it was different.

For the first time, her smile belonged only to her.