

To Dethrone a King

Note to the reader

This book contains themes of abuse, trauma and self harm. I am hoping that I have dealt with these topics correctly and responsibly.

Hope you enjoy reading!!!

Colophon

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Dedicated to all of those who believe in the magic of
books and the power of imagination.

PROLOGUE

Aria

Run now, think later.

The moon hung low in the sky, casting an eerie glow over the dense forest. The air was thick with the scent of pine and the unshakeable feeling of being watched. I could hear the soft rustle of leaves, the crunch of twigs underfoot. Juliana led the way, her steps confident and sure despite the darkness.

I followed her, my heart pounding in my chest, every shadow a potential threat. “They’re close,” Juliana whispered, glancing back at me with eyes sharp and alert. “We need to keep moving.”

I nodded, too afraid to speak. The Purifiers were relentless, their sole purpose to hunt and kill the Enchanted. I could feel their presence

like a cold breath on the back of my neck. Juliana squeezed my hand. “Come on, Aria,” She urged. “We can't afford to slow down.”

We broke into a run, the forest blurring around us. My legs ached, but fear pushed me forward. Every snap of a branch, every distant howl, sent a shiver down my spine. The Purifiers were close—too close.

“Over here!” Juliana called, leading me off the path and into a dense thicket. We crouched low, hidden by the underbrush. I could hear my own ragged breathing, the blood pounding in my ears.

Suddenly, a voice cut through the darkness. “I know you're here. You can't hide forever.”

“Stay quiet.” She mouthed.

I held my breath, trying to silence the terror clawing at my throat. I could feel their presences; a storm about to break. “We'll find you.” Another voice called out, taunting. “And when we do, there'll be nowhere to run.”

Juliana's eyes met mine, determination blazing in them. She nodded towards a narrow gap between the trees. “We can make it.” She whispered. “Follow me.”

We moved silently, slipping through the gap and into a small clearing. The moonlight bathed the space in a pale, ghostly light. I could see the outlines of The Purifiers moving in the shadows, their eyes glowing with a predatory gleam. And then-

“Found you.” He sneered.

“Run!” Juliana yelled, and we were off again, sprinting towards the edge of the forest. The ground was uneven, roots and rocks threatening to trip us with every step, but we couldn't stop.

“Faster, Aria!” She shouted, pulling me along to what looked like a river.

We plunged into the deeper water, swimming with all our might. We waded through, the current tugging at our clothes, trying to drag us down. The Purifiers hesitated at the edge; their eyes locked on us

with murderous intent. The river carried us downstream, the sound of their shouts fading into the distance.

When we finally crawled onto the opposite bank, gasping for breath, Juliana collapsed beside me.

“We lost them.” I panted, a weary smile on my face. “For now.”



The kingdom of Veridorn was once a place of wonder, where magic flowed through the land like an unseen river, enriching the lives of its people. But now, it is nothing more than a tech driven deprived kingdom. The air feels heavy, the magic that once danced freely in the breeze has all but disappeared. King Lucien’s ban on magic has suffocated the life out of Veridorn, his decree that no one should practice the craft turning the kingdom into a cage for those of us born with the gift. The king, paranoid and power-hungry, fears what he cannot control, and magic is at the top of his list.

With the support of the council, he formed a corporation known as The Purifiers, a ruthless group tasked with hunting down and eliminating the Enchanted—those of us who still possess magic. The Purifiers, armoured in black and silver, patrol the streets, shadows at every corner, ready to take anyone they suspect of using magic. For people like Juliana and me, the ban means a life spent hiding, constantly on the run, always looking over our shoulders. Veridorn, once bright and full of life, is now a place of fear.

The castle hidden away in Veridorn, a sprawling stone structure, still stands as a symbol of power, its towers reaching up into the cloudy sky. But even its grand walls can’t keep the fear from creeping in. As Juliana and I push open the heavy oak doors, the familiar scent of damp stone and burning firewood greets us.

I glance at Juliana, her dark hair clinging to her olive face, her clothes soaked through from our mad dash and dive into the river. We’re both freezing, the weight of the water making it harder to move, harder to think.

But at least we're alive.

Inside, the warmth from the fire crackling in the grand hearth reaches us, a sharp contrast to the cold river water still clinging to our skin. Our footsteps echo in the hall, and as we step into the main room, I spot our friends gathered around a sturdy wooden table, deep in conversation. Alexander is the first to notice us, his sharp, bi-coloured eyes locking onto ours, a smirk spreading across his face as he pushes a hand through his blonde hair. “Well, well. Look what the river dragged in.”

“Not exactly the grand entrance I was hoping for,” I say, shaking out my arms, water splattering onto the stone floor.

Christian, ever the joker, leans back in his chair, his light brown hair falling lazily into his eyes. “Taking a swim in the river, were we? I thought the plan was to escape the Purifiers, not give them swimming lessons.”

His hazel eyes twinkle with amusement, and I roll mine in response, unable to stop the smirk tugging at my lips. “Next time I’ll let you do the swimming, Chris.”

Nicholas is more calm as he walks into the room, but I can see the flicker of humour in his brown eyes with those strange blue strands that catch the light.

“You guys look like you took a trip to Myrathis. Let me guess—another close call?” His black hair falls in messy waves as he sits back, crossing his arms.

“Close enough,” Juliana says, wringing out her cloak as she steps forward. “But we got away.”

Elizabeth, her blonde hair framing her serious face, shakes her head, blue eyes narrowing. “You two really need to be more careful. The Purifiers aren’t going to stop until they catch every last one of us.”

King Lucien’s ban on magic isn’t just a political move; it’s a death sentence for the Enchanted. Veridorn’s streets are filled with whispers of disappearances, of people taken in the night by the

Purifiers, never to be seen again. Magic has become a curse instead of the blessing it once was.

We've all lost people—friends, family. This castle might be a temporary refuge, but we all know it won't be long before the Purifiers come knocking on its doors.

"We can't keep running like this." I speak. "Sooner or later, we'll have to make a stand."

Christian leans forward, his hazel eyes softening just slightly, though his tone remains light. "Well, whatever the plan is, maybe next time it doesn't involve soaking yourselves in river water. Just a suggestion."

I laugh despite myself, shaking my head. "I'll try to keep that in mind."

Nicholas's smirk fades slightly, his expression turning thoughtful. "Chris is right, though. We need a real plan. We can't just keep dodging the Purifiers and hoping for the best. The Enchanted are scattered, scared. If we don't act soon, there'll be no one left to fight."

Alexander nods in agreement, his two-toned eyes darkening. "The council won't stop until we're all wiped out. We need to start gathering our forces."

Chris turns his gaze to Liz, "Can't you just ask you Dad?"

Elizabeth's eyes flash with a hint of annoyance. "I can't just ring him up, Chris. He's a King and has his own kingdom to rule. Plus, if word gets out that the King of Velaryth was intervening with the politics of Veridorn, lord knows what Lucien would do."

It's true. We needed a different approach. Asking King Orion to intervene has always been a risk. Elizabeth's father is immensely powerful. He is one of the most skilled sorcerers across the kingdoms, but his presence is commanding, his actions are bold. If he were to confront King Lucien, it wouldn't be a quiet conversation. Orion would bring the full force of his magic, and even with the best of intentions, it could quickly escalate into something far more dangerous.

King Orion isn't one for needless conflict—he values peace and justice, despising the oppression Lucien has enforced on Veridorn. But his involvement could be seen as a threat to Lucien's fragile hold on power, and in his paranoia, Lucien might view it as an act of war. He would declare war upon Velaryth. We couldn't risk that. There had to be another way, something less confrontational, something that wouldn't plunge the kingdoms into chaos.

“Then we come up with a different solution” I finally say.

The fight is coming. And this time, we'll be ready.

ONE

Aria

I haven't slept in days.

Not properly, at least. Every time I close my eyes, the nightmares come. Haunting, relentless, and always the same. I can still feel the cold air of the forest on my skin, hear the snap of branches underfoot, and the heavy silence that followed.

They were close... too close.

Sitting by the window, I stare out into the night. The castle grounds stretch out before me, empty and quiet. It should be peaceful, but peace is a distant memory. My hands shake, but I can't let myself rest. I have spent the last several hours going over the plan in my

head, trying to find holes, trying to prepare for everything that can go wrong.

There's always something we miss.

Prince Damien. He is our only chance. The son of the king, the one person who might be able to stop the slaughter. But getting to him, convincing him to turn against his father... that is something else entirely. Damien isn't like his father, but he isn't one of us either. He walks a fine line, and I don't know which side he'll choose.

Will he see us as enemies or allies?

My thoughts circle back to the dream. The forest, the cold breath on the back of my neck.

They're coming.

I rub my hands together, trying to shake the feeling. It won't leave. It never did. And neither would the nightmares. Juliana had offered to join me with finalising the plans, but I couldn't let her see me like this. Fragile. Weak. There wasn't room for weakness now. We have too much riding on this. If we don't get Damien to help, if we don't stop The Purifiers, there won't be anything left to save.

We can't afford to fail.

I keep my eyes on the horizon, waiting for the first sign of dawn, but the night feels endless. And I know—sleep isn't coming. Not tonight. Maybe not ever again.

Not until this is over.

TWO

Aria

The morning has the kind of stillness that feels deceptive.

Quiet, but buzzing underneath with the things we don't say aloud. I don't know how I manage to pull myself out of bed, much less make it down to the dining room. My head is pounding from the lack of sleep, and I can feel the weariness clinging to me like a heavy cloak. But when I step into the room, I'm greeted by a warmth I hadn't expected.

Alexander, as always, sits at the far end of the table, poised with his coffee cup in hand, looking every bit the perfect gentleman. His dark heterochromatic gaze flicks up briefly as I walk in, and he offers

me a polite nod. It's comforting, in a way, his ability to make even the most mundane moments feel important.

Across the room, Juliana and Nicholas sit together near the window. Nicholas leans forward, pointing something out on the page of a book Juliana has open. She's laughing softly, her expression lighter than usual, and it's enough to make me hesitate at the door. Even Nicholas, seems more relaxed than usual. He's then cleaning his glasses, but he's humming under his breath—a tune I don't recognise but that somehow lightens the room. They look so... normal.

But normal isn't real, not anymore.

Elizabeth is bustling around, setting down plates and chiding Christian, who's already stolen one of the rolls from the centre of the table. "You couldn't wait five minutes for everyone to sit down?" she scolds.

"Why wait when it's right there?" Christian grins, taking a big bite and leaning back in his chair like he owns the place.

"You have the manners of a goat," Elizabeth mutters.

"Thank you," Christian replies, as though she's just paid him the highest compliment.

"Good morning, Aria," Elizabeth says brightly, turning to me. Her blonde hair catches the sunlight streaming in through the windows, and for a moment, she looks like she belongs in one of those old fairy tales. "Come sit. I saved you a plate."

"Thanks," I mumble, sliding into a chair near the corner of the table.

Christian, of course, doesn't bother with pleasantries. "You look like you've been through a storm, Aria. Rough night?"

"Christian, really?" she says, swatting at his shoulder.

"What?" he protests, raising his hands in mock surrender. "I'm just trying to lighten the mood."

"And failing spectacularly," Alexander adds, his voice calm but laced with humour. He takes a sip of his coffee, setting the cup down

with an air of finality. “Perhaps leave the jokes to someone with a touch more finesse.”

Christian gasps dramatically. “Are you saying I lack finesse?”

“I’m saying,” Alexander replies smoothly, “that a goat has better comedic timing.”

“What with everyone calling me a goat!?” Christian says, exasperated.

The table erupts into laughter, and for a moment, it’s easy to forget why we’re here. Elizabeth shakes her head, still smiling as she pats my hand lightly. Though I can’t quite shake the feeling that the laughter is a little too loud, the smiles a little too quick. Are they pretending to be at ease? I can’t tell, and it leaves an odd ache in my chest.

“So,” Nicholas cuts in, slipping his glasses back on and glancing around the table. “What’s the plan for today?”

At this, the lightness in the room dims ever so slightly. I clear my throat, forcing myself to sit up straighter. “We’re going to the grand ball tonight,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady. “We’ll mingle, see what we can learn from the guests. And maybe Damien.” I pause, feeling the weight of his name in the air. “If that doesn’t work, I’ll find a way to spy on him after.”

“Ah, yes,” Christian muses, leaning forward with a mischievous grin. “A ball. What better place for espionage and intrigue?”

“Better than the alternative,” I snap, sharper than I intended.

Elizabeth shoots Christian a warning look before turning back to me. “You don’t have to explain yourself,” she says gently. “We all know how important this is.”

Christian, never one to let a serious moment linger too long, leans back in his chair with an exaggerated sigh. “Well, if anyone can pull off a daring espionage mission, it’s Aria. I mean, she’s practically invisible half the time anyway.”

“Chris!” Elizabeth scolds, though she’s trying not to laugh.

“What?” he says innocently. “I’m being supportive!”

Elizabeth glares at him, and Christian shrugs unapologetically, tossing another roll into his mouth.

“You have the tact of a brick wall,” Elizabeth says, crossing her arms.

“And you have the patience of a saint,” Christian quips, grinning.

“A saint who won’t hesitate to use that spell on you again,” she fires back.

Christian’s grin falters, and he sits up straighter. “You wouldn’t.”

She leans forward, her expression sweet but undeniably menacing.

“Try me.”

“I—I have things to do!” Christian stammers, jumping up from his chair. “Important, very important things.” He dashes out of the room, Elizabeth hot on his heels.

“I’ll turn you into a butterfly, Christian!” she shouts after him.

“And I’ll fly away to freedom!” he calls back, his voice fading down the hallway.

“Well,” Alexander says, breaking the silence as he sets his cup down. “If nothing else, they keep things lively.”

Juliana glances up from her book, a faint smile on her lips. “Lively might be an understatement.”

Nicholas nods in agreement, adjusting his glasses. “You’d think he’d learn by now not to test Elizabeth.”

“Christian? Learn?” Juliana says with mock seriousness. “Now *that’s* wishful thinking.”

Nicholas chuckles, leaning back in his chair. “Fair point.” He turns to Juliana with a teasing smile. “What are you even reading? Or is it just an excuse to ignore the rest of us?”

Jay just rolls her eyes but holds up the book. “It’s on alchemy. I thought you’d approve.”

“Oh, I do,” Nicholas says, leaning closer to examine the page. “But it’s still rude to shut me out entirely.”

“I’m not shutting you out,” Juliana counters, nudging him lightly with her elbow. “You’re just overly needy.”

“Needy?” Nicholas echoes, feigning offence. “I’ll have you know I’m perfectly self-sufficient.”

“Sure you are,” Juliana teases, closing the book with a snap and giving him a knowing look. “Now, are you going to tell me what’s actually on your mind, or are we going to keep pretending you’re not dying to comment on my reading material?”

Nicholas smirks, adjusting his glasses. “Fine. Page fourteen is wrong about the properties of nightshade.”

Juliana groans, but she’s smiling. “You’re impossible.”

Their banter feels so effortless, so natural, that for a moment I forget why we’re all here. But then Alexander clears his throat, and the lightness in the room dims ever so slightly.

“Well,” he says, his tone measured. “I assume we’re all eager to hear the plan for tonight.”

I sit up straighter, the weight of responsibility settling back on my shoulders. “We’re going to the grand ball,” I say, keeping my voice steady. “We’ll mingle, see what we can learn from the guests—and maybe Damien. If that doesn’t work, I’ll find a way to spy on him afterward.”

Juliana frowns slightly. “The prince will be at the ball?”

“He’ll have to be,” Alexander says thoughtfully. “If his father has anything to do with it, he’ll want his son to make an appearance.”

“Wonderful,” Nicholas mutters, leaning back in his chair. “What better place for espionage than a room full of enemies?”

Christian’s voice carries from the hallway before I can respond. “What are you all whispering about in there? Plotting world domination without me?”

Elizabeth returns moments later, looking amused but victorious. “Christian’s fine,” she says to no one in particular. “A little humility never hurt anyone.”

Alexander raises an eyebrow. “You mean he learned something?”

“Doubtful,” Juliana murmurs, earning a chuckle from Nicholas.

“Well, if anyone can pull off a daring mission, it’s Aria,” Alexander says, turning to me with a rare, genuine smile. “You have a talent for slipping under the radar.”

“Thanks, I think,” I reply, managing a small smile of my own. “If we win, we become heroes.”

“And, if we don’t?” Nicholas asks, slightly quiet.

“Then, we’ll become legends.”



I glance at Juliana as she tightens the laces on her boots, the worn leather creaking as she adjusts them for the hundredth time. I can feel her anticipation, the energy she gives off when she’s ready to go. It’s a feeling I’m all too used to—ready for anything, and right now, she’s ready to kick my ass into shape.

“Ready for this?” Juliana asks, giving me a sideways smirk.

I roll my eyes but can’t help the small smile tugging at my lips. “I guess so. You sure you want to waste your time teaching me how to spy on a prince?”

“Aria, you’re going to be in his turf, playing his game,” she says, her voice serious now. “You need to know how to fight as well as you know how to hide. If you’re going to survive—if we’re all going to survive—you need to be prepared for anything.” Her gaze sharpens, and I know she means it. She knows what’s at stake.

“Alright,” I mutter, tying my own boots with more force than necessary. “Let’s do this.”

We head to the practice yard, an open space with high stone walls surrounding it, the gravel crunched beneath our feet. The day’s heat presses down on us, and the air is thick with the scent of earth and sweat. Juliana is already getting into position, her feet planted, her body loose and ready.

I move across from her, adjusting my stance as I brace myself. It’s been a while since we’ve sparred, but I’m no stranger to it. We’ve

had these sessions before—back when we were younger, trying to prove ourselves, trying to be better. I step forward, testing her reflexes. She blocks easily, her eyes never leaving mine, the way she reads my every movement sending a shiver down my spine. I lunge, my sword slicing through the air, but she parries it effortlessly.

“You’re too slow,” Juliana says, her voice cool and collected, but I can see the hint of a challenge in her eyes. “Try again, but this time, don’t hold back.”

My heart races, the weight of her words settling over me. I know what she’s trying to say—that if I hold back, I’ll fail. But every instinct in me wants to take a step back, to hesitate, just for a moment. It’s harder than it sounds, harder than I care to admit. I push forward again, this time with more determination, swinging with everything I have. But she moves faster than I anticipated, catching me off guard. Her blade connects with mine, sending a shock through my arms.

“You’re thinking too much,” she says, grinning now, her tone playful despite the intensity of the fight. “Clear your mind. Focus.”

I growl, frustration building, and throw another attack, faster this time. Juliana ducks under my swing, using the momentum to shift to my side. Before I can react, her blade is at my throat, and she’s grinning again, her eyes flashing with amusement.

“You’ve got to move quicker, Aria. You’re too predictable.” I grit my teeth, ready to swing again. This time, I’ll get her. I will.

But as I charge, Juliana’s eyes narrow. Suddenly, she doesn’t look like herself anymore. Her body begins to twist, her form elongating, the air around us rippling as she shifts. I blink, and in front of me is a snake—long and sleek, its scales shimmering like liquid silver. My heart races as I hesitate, unsure of what to do. But it’s too late.

In an instant, the snake darts forward, and before I can react, I lose my balance, stumbling as I try to catch myself. My sword clatters to the ground, and I land hard on my back. Juliana’s laughter rings in my ears as the snake’s form melts back into hers. She’s standing above me now, her hand reaching down to pull me up.

“That,” I say, pointing a finger up at her, “was cheating and it wasn’t fair,” I get up, brushing the dirt off my clothes, but there’s a grin on my face despite myself.

She raises an eyebrow, the amusement still dancing in her eyes. “What did I tell you? Nothing in life is ever fair.”

I groan, sitting up, and rub my sore side. “Yeah, yeah. You’ve got all the tricks up your sleeve, don’t you?”

She helps me to my feet, the tension between us easing as I straighten my posture. “The sooner you learn that, the better. Life doesn’t owe you anything, Aria. You can’t expect things to go your way just because you think you deserve them.”

“I guess I’ve got a lot to learn.”

“That’s the spirit.” Juliana smirks, pushing my shoulder playfully. “But don’t get too cocky. This fight isn’t over.”

I laugh, still catching my breath, and brush my hair out of my face. “You know, I think I prefer being the one who cheats.”

Juliana grins wider, her eyes glinting with mischief. “Too bad. You’re not getting any more lessons from me unless you show some improvement.”

I roll my eyes, turning to pick up my sword, my muscles sore but satisfied. This mission might not be easy, but I’m not going in unprepared. Not anymore. The yard quiets around us, the sounds of practice fading into the background as I glance back at Juliana, feeling a new sense of determination growing within me. She’s right about one thing. Life isn’t fair. And neither is war. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to sit by and let it break me.

I’m ready for whatever comes next.

And so, the training continues.

THREE

Damien

The castle is a frigid, suffocating space as I push open the heavy-doors. They groan loudly, slicing through the silence like a rusty knife. My father's accusing eyes zero in on me the moment I step in. I walk across the marble floor, each step echoing with a hollow finality, and I can practically feel the weight of the room pressing down on me. He's sitting on his throne like monument to arrogance. The dark wood and heavy curtains around him just add to the chill. His eyes meet mine with the same old look of disappointment and disdain.

"Damien," he says, his voice as cold and sharp as ever. "Get over here."

I walk up to the stem of the throne and bow slightly, trying not to roll my eyes. His eyes, a colder version of my own, make it clear that I'm just another disappointment. It's a look I'm used to that says I'll never live up to his standards. "You called for me." I say, taking a seat.

He leans forward, his fingers clasped together like he's about to deliver some grand revelation. "You know why you're here, right?"

"Not really," I say, trying to keep my boredom from showing. "Why don't you just tell me?"

He doesn't skip a beat. "The Purifiers. I need you to take charge of them. The council might be in charge on paper, but some of the members methods are...unreliable. I need someone I trust to keep them in line."

The Purifiers. Just hearing the name makes me yawn. It's not fear I'm feeling; it's more like an eye roll at the thought of yet another grim task. The Purifiers are known for their ruthless efficiency, and the council keeps their distance. But for my father, it's just another way to dump a dirty job on me.

"So, you think I'm the guy for this?" I ask, barely hiding my disinterest. "Why not let one of your precious council members handle it?"

He gives me that thin, humourless smile that says he's heard enough of my crap. "Because I need someone who won't get tangled up in their politics. I need someone who knows how to keep things under control and can act decisively."

"So, you basically want me to be your personal enforcer," I say, trying to sound amused but failing. "And what's in it for me? Another chance to prove I am worthy in your eyes?" His eyes narrow even further, the crinkles in the corner of his eyes visible.

"This isn't about rewards. This is your duty. If you mess this up, you'll deal with more than just my disappointment."

I feel a flash of irritation but shove it aside. “Fine. I’ll do it. But don’t expect me to get excited about it.”

“Excitement is irrelevant,” He snaps. “Just get the job done. The council is a pain, and I want them out of my way. If you can’t handle that, then you have no place here. You will be the king of Veridorn some day, whether you like it or not.” I nod and start to turn away, but his voice stops me.

“And Damien.” He says, his tone cold. “Don’t try to pull any tricks. I’m watching you.” I don’t bother to reply. Instead, I leave the throne room, the weight of my new assignment hanging over me like a cloud of tedium. For now, I’ll play the part, but the thought of escaping my father’s shadow is the only thing that really interests me. This mansion isn’t just cold; it’s a reminder of everything I hate about my father. The weight of his disdain fills the space more effectively than the draft ever could. The look he gives me isn’t just about disappointment—it’s personal. It’s the kind of resentment that burns deep, rooted in a history neither of us can forget.

My father resents me for a lot of things. Most of all, though, he resents me for being a reminder of a choice, he wishes he’d never made. I was born out of a scandalous affair, a stain on his reputation that he never wanted to acknowledge.

To him, I’m nothing more than a symbol of his own failure to keep his life clean and orderly.

My mother was the unfortunate soul caught in the crossfire. She was executed, her death a public display meant to erase any trace of me from his life. Her death wasn’t just a punishment for her; it was a message to me. My father wanted to make sure I knew exactly what he thought of me—an inconvenience that should have never existed. He wanted to show me that no matter how much he might have grudgingly tolerated me, I would never escape the shadow of her fate. Every glance he gives me, every order he issues, is tainted by that resentment. It’s the fact that I exist at all. The tasks he sets for me, are his way of keeping me busy, a way to shove me into the muck and

remind me of my place. It's not about making me better or proving my worth—it's about ensuring I'm always in the background, never forgetting the price I've paid for being born. I know he sees me as a constant reminder of his past mistakes, a living embodiment of the scandal that tainted his reputation. My very presence is an irritation he can't quite escape, a personal affront he's forced to deal with every time he looks at me.

These tasks are him trying to make me disappear in whatever way he can. He'll never say it outright, but his resentment is there in every order he gives, in every dismissive glance he throws my way. I'm here to clean up his messes and do his dirty work, all while being reminded that I'm nothing more than a blemish on his perfect image. It's this hatred that fuels me and makes me carry out his orders with a blend of detachment and defiance. I'm his unwanted reminder, but I'm also his reluctant pawn.

And while he might hate me, it's not something I can just ignore. It's part of the twisted legacy I've inherited, and it's a driving force behind every step I take in this bleak, unforgiving world. He may resent me for my existence, but I have long stopped caring about his contempt.

In the end, I'm just another tool in his grim little empire, and I'll play my part as coldly and efficiently as he expects.



“Welcome to the Purifier's headquarters.”

The words spill out, more of a grumble than a greeting as I step into the austere building. The air is thick with the smell of metal and the low hum of machinery reverberates through the walls, creating an atmosphere that feels both sterile and oppressive. The cold, grey stone surrounds me like a prison, but it's a prison I've reluctantly accepted as part of my duty. The council might have authorised the

Purifiers, but the responsibility of keeping them in line falls squarely on my shoulders, courtesy of my father's relentless expectations.

I cross the threshold into the central chamber, where flickering lanterns cast ghostly shadows against the walls. The space is filled with the low murmur of voices, but they fall silent as I enter. I glance around, noting the tension in the air, the eyes of the assembled agents on me like hawks waiting for their prey.

Great. Just what I need—an audience eager for my approval.

My gaze lands on Elyan, my seneschal, standing a few paces away. Relief washes over me at the sight of him. Elyan is one of the few I trust—his loyalty isn't up for debate, and his steady demeanour is a welcome balm against the chaos swirling around me. His dark hair is neatly tied back, and his sharp features are framed by the flickering lantern light, giving him an almost ethereal quality. I stride toward him, the tension in my shoulders easing slightly as I draw closer.

"Damien," he greets, his voice low but warm. "I wasn't sure when you'd arrive."

"Traffic in the castle was worse than usual," I reply, trying to mask my irritation with a hint of sarcasm. "You know how it is. What's the status? How are things here?" Elyan steps closer, lowering his voice so only I can hear.

"We've made significant progress in recruitment. More volunteers are coming forward than I anticipated. I think they're starting to see the Purifiers as a path to purpose, especially with the council pushing for more action against the Enchanted."

Of course they would. The promise of power is a lure too enticing to resist. "What about the training?" I ask, keeping my tone even. "Are they prepared for what lies ahead?"

He nods, his expression serious. "We've initiated a new training regimen. They're learning the basics of combat and surveillance. It's not just about brute strength; they need strategy too."

I can't help but feel a flicker of approval. "Good. We can't afford any mistakes." The weight of my father's expectations hangs heavily

on my shoulders, and I can't let myself slip. Not now. "And the council?" I press, wanting to gauge how involved they are.

Elyan shrugs. "They're watching from a distance. They've been too preoccupied with their own agendas to get too involved, which gives us some leeway." *Lucky us.*

"They just want results. They're not interested in the cost."

Elyan's eyes narrow slightly, sensing my frustration. "We'll manage. Just keep your head down and let me handle the details. You have enough on your plate."

His reassurance is a balm, and I nod, grateful for his support. "Thanks, Elyan. I appreciate it." *Someone has to keep me sane in this mess.*

"I've organised a meeting with the recruits in an hour. You'll want to make an appearance," he adds. "They need to see you as a leader, not just a royal."

"Right," I say, feeling a mix of reluctance and duty. "I'll be there." As I turn to leave, Elyan's voice stops me.

"And Damien?"

I glance back, meeting his steady gaze. "Don't let your father's expectations weigh you down. You're more than just his heir."

If only I believed that. "I'll try to remember that" I reply, forcing a small smile before stepping away. The weight of my new responsibilities loom over me like a storm cloud, but Elyan's words linger in my mind.

As I walk deeper into the headquarters, the noise of the Purifiers fades into the background, leaving me with my thoughts. I may be stuck in this role, but I refuse to let it define me. Not now, not ever.

I step into my new office, the door creaking as it swings shut behind me. The room is smaller than I expected, with bare stone walls and a single window overlooking the courtyard below. A sturdy oak desk sits in the centre, flanked by shelves half-filled with scrolls, ledgers, and grim-looking tomes. It's functional, utilitarian—exactly what I would expect from a place like this.

No distractions, no luxury. Just business.

I drop my satchel onto the desk with a thud, the weight of it matching my mood. My fingers brush against the crown I wear—a symbol of a title I didn’t ask for. I pull it off and place it down, the cold metal gleaming under the dim light. It feels good to set it aside, even if just for a moment. A temporary relief from the burden of expectations. “Heavy is the head that wears the crown” as they say, and mine feels heavier than most.

My eyes drift across the room, searching for anything to help me settle into this new role. That’s when I notice the slip of parchment on the desk. I pick it up, my brow furrowing as I scan the hastily scribbled words.

Do not forget the ball next week. Your presence is mandatory.

Of course it is. Another royal duty, another tedious night of small talk and political manoeuvring. I crumple the note in my fist, tossing it aside. The ball might be mandatory, but enthusiasm definitely isn’t. I sink into the chair behind the desk, leaning back as I stare at the ceiling, trying to push down the frustration bubbling inside me. One task after another. One duty after another.

Welcome to my life.

FOUR

Aria

I sit at my desk, eyes scanning over the countless papers and maps laid out in front of me. Prince Damien's face stares back at me from several angles, each photo cold and indifferent, his features sharp and almost cruel. I can't help but hate the smug look in his eyes—like he's untouchable. He's human and we are nothing more than prey in his game of power.

I trace the lines of the map in front of me, mapping out every possible escape route from the masquerade. Damien's palace is a labyrinth of halls, corridors, and hidden chambers, but we've spent weeks studying every inch of it. If we capture him, if we play this right, we can stop the slaughter of the Enchanted. His execution order for anyone with magic could finally come to an end. But if we fail...

I push the thought away, refocusing on the layout. The ballroom is massive, with lofty ceilings and enough space for the hundreds of guests who'll be attending. We'll blend in with the crowd in our masks, and once the dance floor is full, we make our move. He'll be distracted, surrounded by admirers and false allies. Perfect for us. The problem is the aftermath—once we have him, getting out without half the palace guard hunting us down is another matter.

"Let's see..." I mutter, shifting to the map of the ballroom. "If we corner him near the west staircase, we can cut off the exits here and here." My finger taps the key points on the map as if convincing myself for the hundredth time. I've gone through this plan a thousand times in my head, but every detail needs to be perfect. If we capture Damien, the Enchanted might finally have a chance to stop hiding, stop running for their lives. One man holds the key to our survival—or our destruction.

My eyes drift back to Damien's photo. He's handsome in the way all villains are—intense eyes, an air of superiority. I wonder if he'll be able to keep that cold, controlled composure when we have him bound in chains, magic silenced by the enchanted cuffs. The thought almost makes me smile. I sketch out another potential route. If we go through the servant's quarters, we might avoid detection long enough to get to the stables. From there, it's a quick ride into the woods. But the Glimmerwood Forest is unpredictable—one wrong turn and we could be lost for days. And we won't have days. The door creaks open behind me, and I hear the soft padding of footsteps.

"Still obsessing over that bastard, I see," Juliana says, her voice light but laced with sarcasm. She flops down on the couch beside me, her silver hair catching the candlelight like moonbeams. "I've seen you go over this plan at least fifty times, Aria. It's foolproof."

I glance up at her, then back to the map. "That's what people say before everything goes wrong." Elizabeth walks in next, her long emerald coat trailing behind her. She folds her arms, eyeing the mess of papers on the table with a raised brow.

"Well, aren't we being the diligent strategist today?"

“I’d rather be paranoid than dead,” I reply, leaning back in my chair. “We can’t afford mistakes.”

“You’re gonna give yourself a headache if you keep staring at those maps.”

“I already have one,” I mutter, pushing a few stray papers into a more organised pile. “I’m just making sure everything’s perfect. We can’t afford a single mistake.”

“We won’t make any,” Juliana says with her usual confidence, leaning over to peer at the map. “Besides, once we capture Damien, everything changes. No more hunting, no more blood on the streets.”

“Exactly,” I say, though there’s a part of me that still feels the weight of doubt. Capturing a prince isn’t the same as toppling a regime. It’s a start, but it’s not the end. “If he slips through our fingers—”

“He won’t,” Elizabeth interrupts, her tone firm. “We’ve all trained for this, Aria. Every exit is covered, and we know his Purifiers’ patterns. The masquerade is the best chance we have.”

She sits on the armrest of the couch, her warm, hazel-brown eyes focused on me. “Aria, you’ve gone over this plan a hundred times. You know it inside out. We all do. It’s going to work.”

I want to believe her, but there’s that nagging doubt at the back of my mind. One wrong move, and not only will we lose Damien, but we’ll lose our lives. Worse, the Enchanted will lose hope.

“If it works,” I say, letting out a breath, “we stop the slaughter. We save lives. But if we fail, if we get caught—”

“We won’t,” Juliana interrupts, her tone firm. “We’ve trained for this. We know the palace better than Damien himself. And he’ll never see it coming. He thinks he’s untouchable, but we’ll prove him wrong.”

I nod, still doubtful. Jay’s is right—Damien underestimates us. He thinks we’re just some scattered, disorganised group of rebels. He’s going to learn the hard way that we’re much more than that.

Elizabeth stretches her arms above her head and says, “And once we pull this off, we are *soooo* going out for a girls’ night. I’m thinking drinks, dancing, the whole works.”

I raise an eyebrow at her. “You’re thinking about a party? Now?”

She shrugs, flashing a grin. “I’m thinking about celebrating. Come on, Aria, we’re not going to spend the rest of our lives running and fighting. At some point, we get to breathe. We get to live. And that starts with a night out, just us girls.”

Juliana chuckles softly, crossing her arms. “You’ve been dying to get out since this whole mess started. It’s your escape from reality, isn’t it?”

“Damn right it is. I deserve a little fun after nearly getting killed every other week,” Elizabeth shoots back, though there’s a lightheartedness in her voice.

I can’t help but smile, despite everything. There’s something infectious about their optimism, their belief that things can get better, that they *will* get better. Maybe that’s why they’ve been my closest friend through all of this. She reminds me that there’s more to life than just surviving—there’s living, too.

“All right,” I say, leaning back in my chair. “If this plan works, and we get Damien, then we can talk about a night out. But not before.”

Elizabeth beams, clapping her hands together. “It’s a deal.”

Juliana smirks, glancing at me. “You know, I never thought I’d see the day when you agreed to a night of dancing.”

“Let’s just say I’m motivated by the idea of a world where we don’t have to hide who we are,” I reply, my tone softer now. “A world where the Enchanted don’t live in fear.” There’s a brief silence as the weight of my words settles over us. That’s what this is all about, after all. Not just capturing Damien, but ending the oppression, the bloodshed. It’s about giving our people a chance to breathe again, to live.

“We’ll make that world, Aria,” Elizabeth says quietly. “One way or another.”

I look at my friends, their courage and determination in this in this makes me feel a flicker of hope stir within me. Maybe we really can pull this off.

I turn back to the map. “Let’s make sure Damien never sees it coming,”

FIVE

Damien

The hall is ready.

Golden chandeliers hang high above, their soft light reflecting off the polished marble floors. The scent of fresh roses mingles with the faint spice of wax candles, and the air hums with the quiet efficiency of servants putting on the final touches. It's flawless, as always. Everything in the kingdom of Veridorn is flawless—on the surface, at least. I lean against one of the ornate pillars, arms crossed, watching the bustle with faint detachment. I don't mind masquerade balls. They're easy, predictable. People come dressed to impress, whisper secrets behind feathered masks, and dance the night away pretending they're something they're not. It's all very civilised and, frankly, a little amusing.