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Shadow of the Silver Crown

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Introduction

Shrouded in mist and divided by blood, the kingdom of Liraea has never truly known peace. Even before the banners fell and the war-torn fields were abandoned to silence, the realm simmered with secrets—whispered in candlelit corridors, traded between allies who, by daylight, wore the faces of enemies. It is into this uncertain and perilous world that Princess Evelyn Ambrose is called home, the ink of her father's death only just dry, her own name already circulating in the rumors that flit through the haunted palace halls.

For seven years, Evelyn lived beyond the borders of her birthright. Exile was meant to be her safety, a shield from the war that threatened to erase the royal line altogether. But exile, she quickly learned, is its own kind of prison: one where memories grow sharper and the ache for belonging goes unspoken. From the news of the king's assassination—abrupt, brutal, and covered in lies—Evelyn's return is no homecoming, but the opening move in a game she feels unprepared to play.

The court she enters is not the one she remembers. The tapestries are faded, the faces unfamiliar, even those of her own blood. The council, once her father's loyal advisors, now fan the flames of suspicion and urgency; they press Evelyn to support the claims of a chosen heir, hinting strongly that her time abroad has rendered her unfit for true power. Factions whisper promises—and threats—in the same breath, making it dangerously unclear whose loyalty can be trusted, and whose smiles mask knives.

Haunted by the last words she spoke to her father and hounded by accusations neither proven nor disproven, Evelyn finds herself in the crosshairs. Hints of conspiracy glint beneath every surface: a hidden letter here, an interrupted conversation there, and the strange feeling of being watched, always. The rules of court have changed, and it becomes terrifyingly clear that someone has gone to great lengths to ensure the truth stays buried—someone who would stop at nothing to end the royal line once and for all.

The jagged paths of loyalty and ambition twist through the palace like shadowy corridors, each step forcing Evelyn to weigh old ties against new alliances. She cannot survive alone, but trust, she understands, could be more fatal than any sword. As the specter of civil unrest grows heavier and the prophecy of the silver crown hangs over the kingdom, Evelyn must confront not just those who hunger for the throne, but the doubt within herself: the question of what she is willing to sacrifice—her family, her conscience, or her own life—for a kingdom that may not want her at all.

In the shadow of the silver crown, no truth comes without a price. And in Liraea, not all kings and queens are made by birth, but by their survival through betrayal. Here begins Evelyn's fight—not just for power, but for the soul of her kingdom, and for a future written not by fate, but by her own, trembling hand.

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CHAPTER ONE: Exile's Return

The carriage wheels groaned, a mournful counterpoint to the thrumming in Evelyn's chest. Every mile closer to the palace, the air grew heavier, thick with the scent of damp earth and something else she couldn't quite place – dust, decay, or perhaps just the accumulated grief of a kingdom. Seven years. Seven years since she'd last seen the spires of Castle Liraea, then a distant, shimmering promise on the horizon. Now, they loomed, dark and uninviting under a perpetually bruised sky.

Her companion, a stern-faced woman named Lady Elara, shifted in the opposite seat. Elara had been dispatched by the Royal Council to escort Evelyn back, a task she'd undertaken with the practiced efficiency of a seasoned guard dog. "We should arrive by dusk, Your Highness," Elara announced, her voice flat, devoid of any warmth. It was the first time she'd addressed Evelyn with her full title since they'd left the border. Until now, it had simply been "Princess," as if a formality that might be revoked at any moment.

Evelyn merely nodded, her gaze fixed on the passing landscape. The fields were fallow, the cottages looked abandoned, and even the few people they encountered on the road wore a defeated air. This wasn't the vibrant, bustling Liraea of her childhood memories. The war had bled it dry, leaving behind a pallor that extended even to the grey sky. She wondered if the castle, too, had shed its former luster, its grand halls now echoing with the ghosts of happier times.

Her father, King Theron, had sent her away for her safety. At ten years old, Evelyn had been too young to grasp the true horror of the encroaching war, only the searing pain of separation. She'd been bundled into a carriage one cold dawn, waved goodbye to her father and her younger brother, Elian, and sent to the relative peace of a northern Duchy, far from the conflict's reach. Now, the war was over, but peace had not followed. Only silence, and the chilling news that her father was dead.

"The King's death was sudden, Your Highness," Lady Elara continued, as if reading Evelyn's thoughts. "A riding accident, they say. A fall from his horse. Tragic." Elara's tone was carefully neutral, but Evelyn caught the subtle curl of her lip, the slight hesitation before the word "tragic." Evelyn had received the official dispatch, a terse note signed by the First Councillor, Lord Valerius, detailing the unfortunate circumstances. Yet, something in the curtness of the words, the swiftness of the announcement, had unsettled her.

A riding accident. Her father, an expert horseman, one who had practically been born in the saddle? It felt like a flimsy veil over a gaping wound. But she couldn't voice her

suspensions to Elara, who was, for all intents and purposes, the council's eyes and ears. Instead, Evelyn wrapped her arms around herself, feeling the chill seep into her bones, unrelated to the late autumn air.

As the carriage finally rumbled through the outer gates of the castle, Evelyn gasped. The once immaculate courtyard was overgrown, weeds sprouting between the cobblestones. A crack snaked up the main tower, a jagged scar across the otherwise formidable stone. Sentries stood at their posts, but their armor looked dull, their faces grim and wary. It was less a royal residence and more a fortress under siege, even now, in a time of supposed peace.

The carriage halted before the grand entrance, its massive oak doors closed and uninviting. A small retinue of servants and guards stood waiting, their faces a mixture of curiosity and apprehension. As the door opened, Evelyn took a deep breath, steeling herself. This was it. No more exile, no more quiet contemplation. This was her home, and it was broken.

A tall, impeccably dressed man stepped forward, his silver hair neatly combed, his expression grave. Lord Valerius. Evelyn remembered him as a fixture of her father's court, a man of quiet authority. Now, his eyes, though still sharp, held a weariness she hadn't seen before. "Princess Evelyn," he intoned, his voice resonating with formal sorrow. "Welcome home."

His welcome felt less like an embrace and more like a pronouncement. As she descended from the carriage, her legs felt unsteady, as if she were walking on water. Valerius offered her a gloved hand, his touch brief and cool. "We are all greatly saddened by this tragedy. The kingdom mourns." He gestured to the somber faces around them. Evelyn noticed a few more familiar faces – older members of the council, ladies-in-waiting she'd known as a child, now etched with lines of worry. None of them met her gaze for long.

"Where is my brother?" Evelyn asked, her voice surprisingly steady despite the tremor in her heart. Elia. He would be fifteen now, almost a man. She hadn't seen him since he was eight, a mischievous boy with a gap-toothed grin. Valerius hesitated, his gaze shifting almost imperceptibly towards the closed castle doors. "Prince Elia is... recovering from the shock, Your Highness. He has been quite unwell since the King's passing. He keeps to his chambers."

Unwell. The word hung in the air, heavy with unspoken meaning. Evelyn's gut tightened. Elia was strong, resilient. He worshipped their father. This "unwellness" seemed another piece of the strange puzzle that was rapidly assembling itself around her.

Valerius led her through the echoing entrance hall. The grand tapestries depicting the

history of Liraea, once vibrant with color, now seemed muted, as if the light had been drained from them. The air was cold, damp, carrying the faint, persistent smell of ash and old parchment. It was the smell of a home that had died.

As they moved deeper into the castle, Evelyn noticed a subtle shift in the atmosphere. Servants scuttled past, averting their eyes. Guards stood stiffly, their hands resting on their sword hilts. There was an undercurrent of tension, a barely contained anxiety that permeated every stone. This wasn't just a kingdom in mourning; it was a kingdom holding its breath.

"The council has been diligently managing affairs in your father's absence," Valerius informed her, his voice low. "There are many matters to discuss, Your Highness. The succession, most pressing."

The succession. Ah, there it was. Evelyn was the eldest, the rightful heir by birthright. But Liraea's laws were complex, allowing for the council to select a successor if the monarch died without a clear, *competent* heir. Her years in exile, her supposed "unfitness," would be their leverage.

"I understand, Lord Valerius," Evelyn replied, choosing her words carefully. "But first, I wish to see my father's chambers. And then, my brother."

Valerius paused, his hand resting on a heavy oak door. "Of course, Your Highness. Though the King's chambers are... sealed, out of respect." Evelyn raised an eyebrow. "Sealed? Why?"

"For the investigation, Your Highness," a new voice interjected. A portly, officious man with a balding head stepped forward. Councillor Borin, Evelyn recalled. He had always been prone to pomp and circumstance. "The King's death, while deemed an accident, still required a thorough inquiry. Precautions, you understand."

Evelyn felt a spark of anger ignite within her. Her father's chambers, sealed for an investigation into an "accident"? It made no sense. "And what did this thorough inquiry conclude, Councillor?" she asked, her voice sharper than she intended.

Borin flustered, adjusting his silken tunic. "As Lord Valerius stated, Your Highness, a riding accident. A tragic fall." He repeated the words like a well-rehearsed mantra.

"And my father's horse?" Evelyn pressed. "Was it examined? Was there any sign of... anything unusual?"

Valerius cut in smoothly before Borin could stammer out another platitude. "The horse was put down, Your Highness. It was gravely injured in the fall as well. A regrettable necessity."

Evelyn stared at him, a cold dread seeping into her. The king's chambers sealed, the horse destroyed. It was all too convenient, too neat. As if someone had gone to great lengths to erase any lingering questions.

"I see," she said, her voice flat. She didn't see at all. But she knew better than to push them now. She was outnumbered, outmaneuvered, and utterly alone in a castle that felt less like a home and more like a cage.

"We have prepared the West Wing for your residence, Your Highness," Valerius continued, gesturing down a long, dimly lit corridor. "It offers... a measure of privacy." The word 'privacy' felt like a thinly veiled warning. They would be watching her, of course. Every move, every word.

As she was led away, the silence of the castle pressed in on her. The air crackled with unspoken grievances, with hidden agendas. Evelyn felt a prickle of unease at the back of her neck, the distinct sensation of eyes on her. This wasn't mourning. This was suspicion. And as the heavy oak doors of her assigned chambers closed behind her with a soft thud, she realized with chilling certainty that her father's death was no accident. And someone in this very castle had killed him.

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