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The Hollow Heir

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Introduction

Once, the kingdom of Eldorra gleamed like a jewel nestled between untamed forests and silver-peaked mountains. Its bustling markets sang of prosperity, and its gilded palaces sparkled against the weary twilight. But even as banners fluttered in the summer wind, secrets festered behind the marble walls. Centuries-old grudges and whispered betrayals wound through the court like invisible serpents, pressing just beneath the surface, waiting for that single fracture to split the realm apart.

I am Lira Arden, and for most of my life, I walked these corridors unseen, known only as a scribe—one of many low-born hands that inked the kingdom's decrees and the royal family's secrets alike. With quill-stained fingers and a mind hungry for knowledge, I watched the court from the shadows, dreaming of a life less constrained by heritage and the relentless hierarchy of blood. Between catalogued scrolls and stolen moments in the palace library, I nursed bitter truths about my place in this world: a world that applauded lineage, not merit.

Everything changed the night the palace fell silent. The air, heavy with smoke and terror, carried the echoes of a massacre that claimed every member of the royal line. In the aftermath, the candlelit halls offered no comfort, only suspicion and grief. To the astonishment and outrage of all, an ancient decree was unearthed, naming me—unknown, unproven—as Eldorra's last legitimate heir.

I did not ask for destiny's cruel gift. With the queen's crown thrust at my head and the court's daggers at my back, I found myself at the heart of a perilous web. Every advisor eyed me with contempt or calculation. Every ally, it seemed, could be a foe in waiting. And somewhere, in the maze of these cold, echoing passageways, the true architect of the royal family's demise remained at large.

To survive, I must untangle truth from treachery, wielding my wits against riddles laced with centuries-old hatred and plotting. I must decide who to trust—and who will betray me—before I fall to the same invisible blades that ended the house I never truly belonged to. In the midst of threat and intrigue, my personal journey from silent observer to sovereign will determine not just my own fate, but the very soul of Eldorra.

The crown is hollow, its weight almost unbearable, but I have chosen to wear it. This is the story of how I learned that lineage can define birth, but destiny is forged—and sometimes, stolen—in shadows.

CHAPTER ONE: Ashes on the Velvet Throne

The air in the throne room still tasted of ash and fear, a bitter, lingering ghost of the inferno that had consumed not just the royal wing, but an entire lineage. What remained was a macabre tableau: charred tapestries clinging to the walls like blackened skin, the scent of singed velvet, and the unsettling silence that followed the screams. Only days before, this room had pulsed with life, with the clatter of ceremonial armor and the hushed whispers of courtiers jockeying for favor. Now, it was a tomb.

I stood amidst the wreckage, a stark contrast to the opulent destruction. My scribe's tunic, usually smudged with ink, felt absurdly clean, almost disrespectful, in this chamber of death. Around me, the few remaining members of the Royal Council huddled like vultures, their faces a mixture of genuine grief and thinly veiled calculation. Lord Valerius, the stiff-necked Minister of Coin, adjusted his spectacles, his gaze sweeping over the devastation as if calculating the exact cost of the clean-up. Lady Elara, the Head Royal Seamstress and a surprisingly influential voice, wrung her hands, her usually vibrant silks muted by the pallor of her face.

It was Chancellor Theron, however, whose presence loomed largest. His silver hair, usually meticulously coiffed, was disheveled, and his eyes, typically sharp and discerning, held a haunted exhaustion. He was the one who had found the decree, the one who had read its archaic script aloud to a stunned court, naming *me* as Eldorra's legitimate heir. Lira Arden, the girl who alphabetized tax scrolls and corrected the King's occasional grammatical errors, was now, by some twist of fate and parchment, Queen. The absurdity of it was a bitter laugh caught in my throat.

"The decree is clear, Your... Your Majesty," Theron stammered, the title catching in his throat like a shard of glass. His voice, usually sonorous, was a reedy rasp. He held up a thick, brittle scroll, its edges singed, but its intricate royal seal miraculously intact. "Dated from the reign of King Malachi the Third. It outlines a contingency for... complete eradication of the immediate royal line. It dictates succession to the closest living relative with a verifiable blood link, regardless of social standing, provided a specific mark of lineage is present."

My fingers instinctively went to the delicate, almost invisible birthmark just behind my left ear, a small, swirling pattern that resembled a forgotten sigil. My grandmother, long dead, had always told me it was a "kiss from a fae," a mark of good fortune. It now appeared to be a brand of damnation. It was this mark, inexplicably described in the decree, that had sealed my fate.

A low murmur rippled through the gathered advisors. Valerius scoffed, a soft, dry sound that was nonetheless audible in the oppressive silence. "A scribe? Are we truly to believe that centuries of royal blood culminate in... *this*?" His eyes, cold and dismissive, raked over me, assessing my simple tunic, my ink-stained fingernails, my general lack of regal bearing. I felt a prick of old resentment, a familiar burn that I had long ago learned to suppress. For years, I had walked among them, a ghost in the gilded halls, and now, thrust into the light, I was still an object of scorn.

"The decree is law, Lord Valerius," Theron said, his voice gaining a touch of its usual authority. "Disputed only by proof of forgery, which the Royal Scribes' Guild, after exhaustive study, has deemed impossible." He glanced at me, a flicker of something unreadable in his gaze—pity? Desperation? A grudging acceptance?

I felt the weight of their collective stares, a thousand tiny needles pricking at my skin. This was not a coronation, but an inquest. They weren't looking at a queen; they were examining a curiosity, a temporary placeholder until a more suitable candidate could be found, or, more likely, until I became another tragic statistic. The royal family hadn't just died; they had been murdered, their bodies found in the smoldering ruins of their private chambers. The official cause: an accidental fire. The unspoken truth: a calculated assassination. And now, I, the unexpected heir, was simply the next target.

"And what of the investigations, Chancellor?" Lady Elara interjected, her voice trembling slightly. "Have they yielded any results regarding the... the incident?"

Theron sighed, running a hand over his tired face. "The Royal Guard is conducting a thorough inquiry. Commander Thorne is overseeing it personally. But the evidence... it was largely consumed by the fire. We believe it was deliberate, but finding proof of an accelerant or a point of origin beyond the general destruction has proven difficult." He paused, his eyes narrowing slightly as he looked at me. "There were no survivors."

Except me, I thought. The one person with a verified blood connection who wasn't inside the palace on that fateful night. I had been cataloging ancient texts in the secluded lower library wing, a habit that often kept me awake until the early hours. It was a detail I hadn't yet shared with anyone beyond Theron, and I planned to keep it that way. The fewer specific details about my movements, the better. Suspicion was a venomous thing, and I had no desire to drink it.

"So, we have a commoner, plucked from the scullery, to sit on Eldorra's throne, and a murder most foul with no culprits," Valerius sneered, his tone dripping with contempt. "This is a recipe for chaos, Chancellor. The people will not stand for it. The other Houses will not stand for it."

Theron's jaw tightened. "The people of Eldorra crave stability, Lord Valerius. And the

decree is undeniable. Lira Arden is the legal heir. We will announce her accession by week's end."

A cold dread settled in my stomach. "Accession." The word sounded so grand, so final. I, Lira Arden, would be crowned. The weight of it was suffocating. I had spent my life observing the court, deciphering their whispers and understanding their intricate dances of power. But I had never been part of the dance, only the quiet scribe who recorded the steps. Now, I was to lead it, blindfolded, on a floor riddled with traps.

My gaze fell upon the throne itself, still standing amidst the debris, its velvet cushion scorched black, a stark reminder of the fiery end that had claimed its previous occupants. A single, gleaming thread of gold embroidery, miraculously untouched, caught my eye. It was a pattern I knew well: the Arden sigil, a climbing vine intertwined with a single, regal rose. My family's ancient crest. A symbol I had only ever seen on dusty historical texts, never imagined it would one day represent my own dubious claim to power.

Valerius stepped forward, his voice a low, menacing hiss meant only for Theron and me. "She will be a puppet, Chancellor. And a short-lived one at that. There are those who will not tolerate a 'hollow heir' on the throne of Eldorra."

The words echoed the title of the ancient decree: *The Hollow Heir*. A grim prophecy, perhaps, or a stark warning. I felt a sudden, sharp clarity. They expected me to fail. They *wanted* me to fail. And somewhere in the shadows, the true architect of the royal family's demise was undoubtedly watching, waiting for the perfect moment to finish what they had started.

"I understand your concerns, Lord Valerius," I said, my voice, to my own surprise, steady and clear, cutting through the tense silence. "But the law is the law. And Eldorra needs a leader, not an endless debate." My gaze met his, unwavering. "I may be an unexpected heir, but I am the legitimate one. And I will find out who murdered my... my family." The word felt foreign, clumsy, yet it was true. By blood, they were my family, however distant. Their fate could very well be mine.

Valerius blinked, clearly taken aback by my sudden assertion. A flicker of something, perhaps grudging respect, perhaps new apprehension, crossed his face. Theron, however, looked almost relieved, a faint smile touching his lips.

As the sun began to set, casting long, eerie shadows across the ruined throne room, I knew my life as a humble scribe was irrevocably over. The game had begun, and I, Lira Arden, the Hollow Heir, was now the reluctant, yet undeniable, queen. The question was not *if* I would become a target, but *when*. And could I find the killer before they found me?

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