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The Splintered Crown

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Introduction

When the sun sets on Eldoria's battered countryside, its towers cast long, broken shadows across the land—a silent testament to a kingdom in turmoil. Gone are the days of quiet splendour, of harmonious rule from the gleaming capital of Caelora. The king—once the heart of Eldoria's tenuous peace—has fallen to an assassin's blade. Now, a splintered crown sits waiting, as deadly whispers curl through corridors polished by centuries of power and ambition.

In the wake of the king's death, the royal court is a nest of coiled vipers. Princess Arina, once sheltered from the world behind silk curtains and guarded words, finds herself thrust into peril and expectation. Her mind, always quick and searching, is clouded by grief and the heavy weight of a legacy she may not be able to guard. She is forced to question the loyalty of everyone she encounters—especially her own. Even as she sharpens her resolve, doubt gnaws at every decision she makes, aware that a single misstep could plunge Eldoria into civil war.

Beyond the gilded gates, Arina's estranged half-brother, Darius, moves among the commonfolk. Bastard-born yet fiercely charismatic, Darius has never known the safety of privilege but has earned something more volatile: the people's devotion. Old resentments and fresh betrayals curl around him as he is pulled into a web of intrigue spun by those who see, in his blood, a chance for upheaval. He is torn—does he seek what was denied him since birth, or protect the nation from fracturing beneath hungry courtiers and seditious nobles?

Moving quietly through the heart of the castle is Lysander, court mage and Arina's confidante—haunted by a dangerous secret he would kill to keep. Magic, long associated with shadow and suspicion, gives Lysander prestige and peril in equal measure. His secret romance with Arina is a tightrope walk above a pit of suspicion. If revealed, it could be used to destroy them both or unite a kingdom by force or blood.

As the intrigue deepens, Eldoria teeters on the brink—faction against faction, desire against duty, all against the unrelenting call of ambition. The country's fractured borders are reflected in the hearts of its would-be rulers. Here, trust is both currency and curse, and every act of mercy or love is weighed against a thousand dangers.

This is the story of three souls entwined by fate—each hiding scars, each carrying secrets, each forced to reckon with the legacy of the dead king. In opulent courts and on war-torn fields, beneath ancient forests and inside stone walls humming with magic, choices will be made. For in Eldoria, the crown may be splintered, but its lure is as bright—and deadly—as ever.

CHAPTER ONE: The Ashen Throne

The air in the Throne Room of Caelora Castle had always hummed with a specific kind of solemnity, a weight of history and purpose. Now, it reeked of ash and betrayal. King Theron's ornate, high-backed throne, usually gleaming with the polished ebony and silver inlay of Eldoria's proud lineage, was smudged with a fine, grey powder, a silent testament to the devastating magic that had snuffed out his life. Princess Arina stood before it, her slender frame almost swallowed by the vast, echoing space, the stillness a heavy shroud.

Her father, King Theron, had been a man of booming laughter and quiet wisdom, a monarch who preferred a good book in the royal library to the endless posturing of court. That preference, she now realized with a cold stab of guilt, had perhaps been his undoing. He'd trusted too easily, assumed goodwill where there was only avarice. And now, he was gone, a hollow space in the world and a gaping wound in Arina's heart. She clenched her fists, her nails biting into her palms, a desperate attempt to anchor herself against the tide of grief threatening to pull her under.

The details of the assassination were still hazy, pieced together from panicked whispers and the frantic accounts of the few guards who had survived the magical blast. A sudden, blinding light, a concussive force that shook the very foundations of the castle, and then... silence. A silence that had been broken only by the wails of servants and the frantic shouts of the Royal Guard. Arina had been in her private chambers, practicing a particularly intricate piece on her harpsichord, when the tremor hit. She remembered the crystalline notes dying in the air, the sudden, bone-deep chill that followed.

Her lady-in-waiting, Elara, a woman whose usually unflappable demeanor was now fractured by fear, had been the one to deliver the news. Arina remembered Elara's pale face, the way her voice had cracked as she uttered the unspeakable words. "The King, Your Highness... he's... he's gone." The world had tilted then, colors bleeding into a monochrome blur. Arina had felt a strange dissociation, as if she were watching herself from a distance, a character in a tragedy she couldn't escape.

The funeral, held with an uncomfortable haste just two days prior, had been a blur of dark robes, hushed condolences, and the suffocating scent of lilies. Arina had stood beside her mother, Queen Isolde, a woman who seemed to have aged a decade in a matter of hours, her regal composure strained to breaking point. The Lords and Ladies of Eldoria had filed past, their faces a mixture of genuine sorrow and barely concealed calculation. Arina had seen the glances, the subtle shifts in posture, the way conversations ceased abruptly as she approached. Everyone was watching. Everyone

was wondering.

She was the King's only legitimate child, his designated heir. But she had been raised in the gentle art of diplomacy, of courtly dances and ancient poetry, not the brutal realities of succession in a kingdom already fractured by internal strife. She had never been prepared for this. The weight of the crown, even just its phantom presence, felt like a leaden cap crushing her skull. She felt raw, exposed, and utterly alone.

A quiet creak of the Throne Room's massive oak doors startled her. She turned, her hand instinctively going to the small, jeweled dagger she kept hidden in the folds of her gown—a childhood gift from her father, surprisingly sharp despite its decorative hilt. It was Lysander, his typically composed features etched with a fatigue that mirrored her own. His dark robes, usually impeccable, were slightly ruffled, and the silver pendant of Eldoria's court mages, an intricate design of a soaring falcon, hung askew on his chest.

Lysander was more than just the King's Royal Mage; he was Arina's oldest friend, her confidant, the only person in the entire castle with whom she could truly be herself. Their bond had always been strong, forged in shared hours poring over ancient texts in the royal library, debating philosophy, or simply sitting in comfortable silence. But lately, their connection had deepened into something else, something dangerous and thrilling, a forbidden current flowing beneath the surface of their public personas.

His eyes, usually a piercing blue that could seem to see through her very soul, were clouded with a sadness that reflected her own. He walked towards her, his footsteps almost silent on the marble floor. "Your Highness," he murmured, a customary formality that felt out of place between them.

Arina shook her head, a wisp of dark hair escaping her meticulously braided coiffure. "Not yet, Lysander. Not yet." The words tasted like ash. "What news from the investigations?"

Lysander paused, his gaze sweeping over the ashen throne, a flicker of something unreadable in his eyes. "The Royal Guard is still combing the castle, meticulously, but the initial reports... they confirm the use of arcane magic, powerful and precise. Too precise, perhaps, for a rogue sorcerer acting alone." He chose his words carefully, as he always did, his voice a low, melodic baritone. "There are whispers, Princess. Of betrayal from within."

Arina's stomach clenched. "Whispers are easy to spread, Lysander. Facts are harder to come by." But she knew he spoke the truth. The air in the castle was thick with suspicion, every shadow seeming to hold a hidden knife. "Do they suspect a specific House? A foreign power?"

Lysander sighed, running a hand through his dark hair. "The High Council is divided. Some point to the northern clans, always restless. Others to the southern Duchies, who resented your father's taxation policies. But the more discerning... they look closer to home." He met her gaze, and in his eyes, Arina saw the unspoken truth: *someone in this very court is responsible.*

A shiver traced its way down Arina's spine. The thought was chilling. To be surrounded by those who plotted her father's demise, to smile and nod to faces that harbored such treachery... it was a viper's nest. "And your own findings, Lysander? Your magic... can it tell you nothing more?"

He hesitated, a subtle tension in his shoulders. Lysander's power was a curious thing, not overt like the destructive blasts that had killed her father, but more attuned to sensing residual energies, to deciphering the subtle echoes of magic left behind. It was why he was so invaluable, and why some at court regarded him with an unsettling blend of awe and fear.

"The energy signature was... unique," he said slowly, his brow furrowed in concentration. "Powerful, yes. But also... fragmented. As if the spell was woven by someone struggling to control its full force, or perhaps, deliberately masking its true origin." He paused, his gaze distant, as if seeing beyond the physical world. "There's a faint residue, Princess. Like the scent of a rare herb, lingering in the air. Something I cannot quite place."

Arina felt a spark of hope, quickly extinguished by the enormity of the task ahead. "So, a powerful, perhaps inexperienced, mage with access to the castle, who can mask their magical signature. That narrows it down to... everyone and no one." She let out a humorless laugh. "A promising start to my reign, wouldn't you say?"

Lysander stepped closer then, breaching the invisible wall of formality that separated a Princess from her courtier. He reached out, his fingers gently brushing her arm, a fleeting, intimate touch. "It will not be easy, Arina. But you are stronger than you know. Your father... he saw it in you. Your quick mind, your compassion. These are not weaknesses. They are strengths."

His touch, brief as it was, sent a jolt through her, a warmth in the chilling space of the Throne Room. She looked into his eyes, and for a moment, the heavy weight of the crown, the grief, the betrayal, all faded. There was only him, and the unspoken language that flowed between them. It was a dangerous comfort, a forbidden solace.

"Strengths that feel entirely inadequate right now," she confessed, her voice barely a whisper. "I was meant for books and debates, Lysander, not for navigating a court of vipers while a civil war brews on the horizon."

He shook his head, his hand dropping from her arm, though his gaze remained steadfast. “The King prepared you, Arina, in ways you may not yet perceive. His quiet diplomacy, his unwavering belief in peace... these were lessons. And now, you must apply them. But you will not be alone.”

The words were meant to reassure, but Arina felt a fresh wave of dread. Not alone, perhaps, but certainly surrounded by enemies. And among them, a killer. She looked back at the ashen throne, its silent grandeur now an empty mockery. The kingdom of Eldoria, already teetering, had fractured further with her father’s last breath. The game had begun, whether she was ready for it or not. And Arina, the sheltered princess, found herself unexpectedly thrust onto the chessboard, a reluctant queen in a game where the stakes were life, death, and the very soul of her kingdom.

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