

Content Warning

Thank you for reading this book. Please be aware that this story contains intense emotional themes, including anxiety, depression, trauma, deep grief and loss. It also includes graphic fantasy violence, blood and gore, death, captivity, psychological manipulation and themes of self-sacrifice.

Please take care of yourself while reading. If you need to stop or take a moment, that is absolutely okay. Your well-being comes first.

CHAPTER I: THE FIRE AND THE THIEF

Song - So Far so fake – Pierce The Veil

Below Khaelora's walls, the Drayvens were moving, their limbs snapping and popping as they dragged themselves through the mud. Every breath Aria took was a mouthful of hot ash that burned all the way down.

Through the noise, the whispers came.

Unlovable. Aria's knuckles turned white against the hilt of the Blade of Ashes.

Her head snapped back, her eyes widening. She loosened her grip on the reins. "How..." Aria whispered. She squeezed her eyes shut, and shook her head. "No, Aria. It's not true."

Beneath her, Obsidian shifted, the horse's muscles bunching with a panic she could feel through the saddle.

Weak. The gates behind them shuddered. The impact didn't just rattle the wood; it vibrated through Aria's teeth, shaking the very ground.

You will bow again.

"Not tonight," Aria spat, the words catching on the soot in her throat.

A Drayven burst from the smoke, a mess of teeth and reaching claws. She collided with it. She shoved the Blade into its chest. Fire hissed along the wound, the heat singeing Aria's eyebrows as the creature disintegrated into a pile of oily black soot under Obsidian's hooves.

Beside her, a boy in a dented breastplate stared. He was shaking. His shield knocked against his knee. Aria caught his eye and let out a laugh.

"If I don't laugh," she gasped, her smile tight and trembling, "I'll cry and I am not a quiet crier."

The boy let out a breath that might have been a laugh.

Behind them, the iron hinges of the gate shrieked. Then came the roar of Gideon.

"HOLD! HOLD THE LINE!"

The soldiers threw their shoulders into their shields. More Drayvens poured from the dark. One creature dragged its shattered spine through the dirt eyes fixed on her.

He left because you were never enough.

Aria's lungs seized. The fire along her blade sputtered, the orange light dying down to a dull, bruised glow. But the Drayvens just kept coming.

The whispers were a deafening roar now, but Aria drowned them out with a scream of her own as the Drayvens surrounded her.

The Blade of Ashes jerked in her hand and it began to pull. Aria felt her vision blur at the edges, the vibrant red of the battlefield fading to a dull, dusty grey. Her knees hit the ground, then she felt herself slipping.

Her heart gave one thud and stopped.

Darkness rushed in. The war was gone. Gideon's roar was gone. There was only the vast, empty cold of the void.

Above her it wasn't a whisper this time. It was a deep and resonant sound.

"Daughter," the heavens breathed, the word vibrating through her nonexistent ribs. *"Arise."*

Aria's eyes snapped open. She caught her reflection in the soldier shield and her eyes glowed ember.

When she stood, she didn't use her muscles; she simply rose. The mud dried instantly beneath her boots. The blood on her armor turned to steam.

"Arise," the echo was still vibrating in her teeth.

A pack of Drayvens lunged. A roar of white flame erupted from the Blade of Ashes, sweeping across the mud in a circle. The Drayvens didn't shriek. They didn't have time. Leaving nothing behind but the smell of ozone and the glowing orange outlines of where they had stood a second before.

Aria turned slowly. Beside her, the young soldier, the boy with the rattling shield was making a small sound in his throat. He pressed his back against the stone of the gate, his fingers clawing at the mortar.

Further back, the veteran soldiers lowered their swords. They didn't cheer. They didn't shout for Khaelora. They made the sign of the sun over their hearts and stepped back.

King Gideon took a single step toward her, his hand reaching out, then stopping. His face softened as he grabbed his daughter's cheek.

"Aria?" he whispered.

The ember hue behind Aria's eyes flickered and died, leaving her vision tunneled and dark. The weight of the Blade of Ashes returned, dragging her arm down until the tip of the steel hissed in the wet mud. She looked at Gideon, her father, her King and saw the way he gripped his sword.

"Aria," he said, his voice barely a breath.

She tried to answer, but her throat was full of dry ash. Her knees buckled, and before she could hit the ground, Gideon caught her. Even as her consciousness began to fade, Aria felt her father's body trembling as he held her.

Aria woke not to the sound of steel, but to the frantic strumming of a lute.

One moment she was in her father's hands and the next, she was wrapped in silk sheets that smelled of lavender and sweat. Outside her chambers, Khaelora was breathing again. The "Victory of the Ash Bearer" they were calling it.

Aria bolted upright in bed, her heart hammering against her ribs. Outside Khaelora heralds bounced off the stone walls of the palace, demanding she rise for the Victory Scroll. Every note made her head pound. She wasn't ready to be a Princess again, not when the smell of blood still clung to her hair and the sky's voice was still in her bones.