



TODAY WAS GOING TO BE REVOLUTIONARY, ARIA LOVERIDGE THOUGHT as she got out of bed and reached for the metal-fibre gloves from her bedside table. Next to them, propped up against the box of dominoes, was a little note from her dad.

Morning, Sparkler! Wager a game of dominoes after the big do?

Aria smiled as she slipped on the gloves. “Sparkler” was her dad’s nickname for her, after the little firework. Ever since she was born, she’d been quick to alight and quick to temper. Her childhood tantrums were legendary – a common early indicator of the gene.

But even before they discovered she was a dreamslinger – that is, a carrier of the dreamslinger genetic mutation – her dad had made sure she knew there was nothing wrong with her. She was merely a deep-feeling kid. A person who felt the world more

than the average. As her parent, his job was to teach her how to manage those big emotions.

He was, hands down, her biggest hero. And today he was finally going to be recognised in front of the entire country.

Giddy with nervous anticipation, Aria made her way down to the lab in the basement of Resthaven Home for Dreamslingers, joining her fellow PJ-clad residents for their morning check-ins.

"Aria Loveridge, please approach," Dr Dixon's stiff voice rang out as he released a resident from one of the four chambers spanning the length of the lab. He strode across the shiny tiled floor to sit back at his desk, opening Aria's file on his computer and nodding towards the plastic chair. Before Aria had a chance to sit down, the questioning began.

"The brain monitor recorded heightened activity during your sleep last night between 3:12 a.m. and 3:40 a.m. Did you have any dreams?"

Aria fidgeted with her gloved fingers. "I remember one where I lost a few of my teeth. I hate those. And I think I also had one where I couldn't find the toilet. Pretty *crappy*, if you ask me."

He pretended not to hear her joke. "Did you have any dreams about the Nightmare Circle?"

"Yes." This was pretty standard. For a reason no one really understood, all dreamslingers shared the same recurring dream. They would find themselves in a circular wilderness, containing a creek, a valley and eerie woodlands, all blanketed by a violet sky.

"Did you encounter any of the Beasts in the Circle?" Dr Dixon continued.

"Yes, the Bird Beast."

The gigantic bird with a tail of flames was one of the four Beasts

that dreamslingers could encounter in their dreams. There was also the Turtle Beast (whose shell was made of ice), the Tiger Beast (whose fur was made of autumn leaves) and the Dragon Beast (whose scales were made of flower petals). All four were as giant and terrifying as they were strange and mesmerising.

Dr Dixon typed into his computer. "Did the Beast lure you to its sea?"

Aria lowered her eyes and gave a small nod. She'd followed the bird to the south end of the Nightmare Circle, where the curved boundary abruptly gave way to a chasm of burning fire.

No one knew why there were four "seas" – the South Sea of Fire, the North Sea of Ice, the West Sea of Floating Leaves, and the East Sea of Poisonous Plants – surrounding the edges of the Nightmare Circle, each guarded by one of the Beasts. Nor did they understand why the Beasts tempted the dreamers to jump into the seas. What Aria did know was that ignoring the inexplicable desire to leap into the seas took every speck of willpower she had.

Dr Dixon stopped typing into the computer and narrowed his eyes at Aria. "And did you make contact with the South Sea of Fire?"

"Only with my toes," Aria quickly admitted, knowing that any lies would be uncovered as soon as she went into the chamber. "Then I immediately pulled back, I swear."

Entering the seas infected dreamslingers with that sea's particular affliction: when the dreamer woke up, their Outbursts that day would take the form of the sea they had encountered. Fire, ice, wind or poison.

Dr Dixon's shrewd eyes bored into Aria as he pushed the return button on his keyboard. "You know as well as I do how much

is riding on today. Your dad has worked hard to get us here. Do *not* let us down.”

Aria huffed. “Really, Dr D? As if I’m not putting enough pressure on myself!”

She was well aware that as Professor Jack Loveridge’s daughter, she’d be seen as a walking example of his work. Her dad’s pioneering research on dreamslinger welfare was the reason the gene-compromised were finally being treated with the care they’d been denied for far too long. Resthaven was the result of all his work. And if today was a success, the Resthaven model would be replicated throughout the entire country. There’d be no room for mistakes today.

“Now go extract everything acquired during your dream. Every last drop.”

Aria hurried down the hall of extraction rooms, past the heated chamber able to melt ice within seconds, the detoxification chamber able to nullify all manner of poisons, and the vacuum chamber designed to withstand gale-force winds, to get to the fourth chamber. This one was padded with fireproof walls, the floor and ceiling covered with a white fire-extinguishing gel.

Bolting the door behind her, Aria peeled off her protective metal-fibre gloves, and immediately felt the onslaught of feelings she’d been trained to withhold. As with all dreamslingers, emotions were the trigger to Aria’s Outbursts, and inside the safety of the chambers was the only time the residents were encouraged to let them go. She cracked her knuckles, the anticipation of release almost painful under her skin. Then she allowed the storm of nerves, fear, excitement and tension to reach their peak before expelling it all from her person.

She let out a deep-bellied howl as hungry flames whooshed out from her fingertips, and with it came a delicious sense of release. She closed her eyes and let her mind wander. She thought about how lucky she was to be in Resthaven. How nice it'd been to celebrate her fourteenth birthday with her fellow residents. How safe she was inside these walls.

Soon, she was travelling back to the memory of her first Outburst. It was a year ago now, when she was still thirteen, during school camp at Almiro State Park. She'd fallen asleep in her cabin, her belly full of s'mores and campfire stories, when she'd had a terrifying dream of a giant amber-leafed tiger chasing her into a sea of floating autumn leaves.

When she bolted awake from the nightmare, her body had tingled painfully like it had been dunked in hot crackling candy. Scared and confused, she'd shaken out her throbbing fingers, only to release a deadly windstorm into her cabin. The windows exploded and her sleeping cabinmates were flung violently from their bunk beds, hitting the ground like rag dolls. That was how Aria discovered she was a carrier of the dreamslinger gene.

It was safe to say she was traumatised. Learning you suffered from the same genetic mutation as the people who had killed your mom was enough to scar a kid for life.

Back in the extraction chamber, Aria drained every last wisp of fire she could conjure from her hands until all that spat out was smoke. And only when her body was numb and her throat hoarse from howling did she allow herself to leave, finally feeling prepared to face what was sure to become the best day of her and her dad's lives.



“Basima, I think we need a bit more polish on these floors. I can’t see my reflection.”

“Maria, let’s make sure the singed curtains are all replaced. Oh, and the yoga mats with the acid burns, too.”

“Do you think they should film the meditation room or the breath-work pods? Actually, maybe the art-therapy wing would be better.”

Aria was aware she was probably coming off bossy and demanding to the Resthaven staff, which was not her intention. But as she scoured every corner of the Home on the way to the Morning Mantra session, she was gripped with the need for everything to be *perfect* for her dad’s big moment.

It wasn’t every day that the US Commissioner of Dreamslinger Relations and the governor of Texas came to visit, let alone sign the national rollout of your dad’s Dreamslinger Home initiative live on national television. This was their one chance to make Resthaven the sparkling example of what could be in every state in the US.

Realising she was late, Aria hurried to the common room to lead Morning Mantra.

“Restrain, contain, maintain!” Aria chanted from the stage as the residents beat their bowl drums and joined her in repeating the same three words over and over again. “Restrain, contain, maintain!”

Morning Mantra always took place after the check-ins with Dr Dixon and his team. It only took five minutes, but Dad was right that it helped start each day with gratitude and united purpose.

“Grateful are we for the protection we receive, from the dangers within us we cannot foresee,” Aria recited to conclude the session. “May we be free from doing harm to our kin, and each do our part for goodness to win.”

“Restrain, contain, maintain!” the residents echoed in unison.

Aria was just stepping off the stage when Pablo, a sixteen-year-old fellow resident, turned on the news.

“Guys, look – there’s been another anti-slinger attack in Almiro!”

Everyone crowded around the tiny TV.

“That’s the third in as many weeks,” Levi, another resident, pointed out, shuddering. “Isn’t that the town hall? That’s just down the road.”

Aria spoke above the residents’ worried mutterings. “That’s why today is so important. Dad’s work is helping counter anti-slinger rhetoric, but there’s a lot more work to be done.”

The residents nodded in agreement.

“Makes you appreciate how far we’ve come,” Pablo murmured, which prompted another series of nods.

He was right. Dreamslingers had always been a marginalised group in society, deemed dangerous, volatile, and to be avoided unless necessary. But ten years ago, when there was a mass dreamslinger Outburst in Texas, thousands of people had died and the landscape had shifted overnight. Many states passed laws that allowed dreamslingers to be locked up without the need for trial. Mere suspicion was enough to be incarcerated for life. They’d become public enemy number one.

Some particularly fervent anti-slingers went as far as to demand the eradication of all dreamslingers, as if they were pests who

needed to be culled. But through the chaos, Aria's dad had risen as a voice of radical compassion.

Despite the Great Outburst having killed Aria's mom, her dad had introduced a revolutionary approach to dreamslinger welfare. He argued that the gene-compromised were not criminals. They were patients who deserved society's care. If dreamslingers could be taught the skills to "restrain, contain and maintain", it would create a win-win for humanity. Little did he know that when his daughter hit puberty she'd become one of the beneficiaries of his work.

Aria owed everything to her dad. Pride swelled in her chest as she returned to her room to grab one of her late mom's journals and to wrap the band with a four-petalled flower – the universal dreamslinger symbol – around her upper arm. It was another of her dad's recommendations. Wearing the symbol prevented dreamslingers from being accused of hiding their identity for nefarious reasons. It also allowed more cautious citizens to keep their distance, and be safe from any potential Outbursts. In Aria's experience, the armband was an effective tool for her safety, and for others'.

Satisfied that it was affixed properly to her arm, Aria made her way to the main doors of Resthaven and faced the bright morning, already heady with the summer heat. Her dad and the important guests were arriving later this afternoon for their big live-streamed event. And there were still many things to be done.

But first, there was somewhere important Aria needed to go.



ARIA'S MOM HAD ADORED SUNFLOWERS. IT WAS WHY HER DAD HAD scattered her ashes at the Almiro Sunflower Fields, where, in the summer, the meadows would come alive – their bright, gleeful faces blooming like a million petalled suns. Her dad said Aria had taken her first steps amongst these flowers, recounting how the giant stalks crowded around her like proud, doting aunties, and how they'd celebrated afterwards with a picnic by the lake.

Aria was barely four years old when her mom, Ersa Loveridge – who'd chosen her English name after the Greek goddess of dew – was killed during the Great Outburst. And with her died a part of Aria too, including her connection to Korea – her mom's birth country. The only memories she had of her mother were of the lucky number-eight pendant she'd worn around her neck, the warmth of her embrace, and her scent – a light citrusy white musk that Aria would recognise *anywhere*. That, and a lullaby she

used to sing as she cradled Aria to sleep. Aria visited the Fields often, whenever she wanted to feel closer to her. Because here, her mom was eternal.

"Hey, Mom, today's the big day," Aria said out loud as she wandered through a grove of happy yellow faces, rubbing the pendant that had belonged to her mom and that she now wore around her neck. She looked down at the journal she'd brought with her. This one was titled *Ersa's Treasures, Volume 8: Highly Specific Emotions I Didn't Know There Were Names For* in her scratchy handwriting.

Her mom had a box full of the tiny journals, each one a unique collection of treasures that tickled her curiosity at the time. Funny song lyrics. Interesting names. One even chronicled a database of animals she could see in the clouds. This notebook was one of Aria's favourites, though, because it almost felt like having a conversation with her mom.

"Dad's going to wow the nation today, Mom. I'm so proud of him. Aren't you?" Aria opened the journal to a random page and pointed to the first word her finger landed on.

The entry read:

*SAUDADE (Noun) (Portuguese origin):
Nostalgia and the love that remains;
a desire to be near something or someone distant.*

Aria nodded. "I wish you could be here with us, too. But you're okay wherever you are, right?"

Aria chose another page at random and placed her finger on a word without looking. This time, the entry read:

HIRAETH (Noun) (Welsh origin): (1) Homesickness for a home to which you cannot return; or (2) A longing for a home that never existed.

Aria sighed. "I'm sorry you're homesick, Mom. If it's any consolation, I am, too. But not homesick for a place. For a time. Back when home was the three of us."

She felt the sticky tendrils of loss weaving through her ribs, and she put the book away before the glueyness seeped further in. Instead, she walked towards the lake, singing the lullaby her mom used to sing to her.

*Fly, free bird, fly
 Fly, free bird, fly
 Don't let them clip your wings
 When you were born to soar
 Fly, free bird, fly
 Fly, free bird, fly
 For there, beyond the grey
 You'll find a new door
 My wings will guide you home*

Grief was the hardest emotion to restrain, let alone control or maintain. All the emotional regulation techniques she'd learned from Resthaven hadn't yet given her the skills to master it. Because grief couldn't be tamed like frustration or anger. It was slippery. Unpredictable. It crept up on you when you least expected it and took the floor out from under you.

As if illustrating the point, an errant flame erupted from her

fingers, leaping onto the patch of grass as she came out into the lake's clearing. She grunted and quickly stamped it out before it could spread.

There was a flurry of activity near the lakeside, and she turned her attention to the commotion, grateful for the distraction. There seemed to be a group of young kids gathered in front of some older teenagers in cloaked hoods with symbols on the backs. It looked like some kind of a cosplay meetup.

But as one of the teenagers chanted something, a turtle the size of a dinner table with a shell of ice materialised beside him. Then another cloaked teen summoned a gigantic dragon who had petals for scales. A shiver ran down Aria's back.

Most of the local kids shrieked and immediately made a run for it. They knew the rule when it came to dreamslingers – engage at your own peril. Only a brave few, or perhaps they were the foolish ones, stayed back, trembling but too curious to leave.

Aria gawked at the familiar creatures in the unfamiliar setting. That ice-shelled turtle and petal-scaled dragon were Beasts from the Nightmare Circle. But how were they *here*?

"You guys want to have some fun?" the teen with the Turtle Beast asked the remaining kids with a grin, and he slung his hands towards the lake. Aria flinched, expecting an ice Outburst. Instead, a sheet of ice began forming on the water. The frosty shell on the Turtle Beast glowed as the boy's fingers did an intricate dance, constructing an ice slide on the floe that spilled into the lake. "Thought you might like to cool off in this heat."

One fearless kid peeled off his T-shirt and jumped into the lake with a howl, eager to try out their frosty new waterslide.

“What about a rope swing?” the teen with the petalled dragon teased. “Bet I can make one like you’ve never seen before.”

She slung her hands towards the nearest field of sunflowers and made a *Come here* motion. Her dragon glowed as one stalk stretched all the way towards the lake as if made of stretchy elastic. The girl twirled her hands and made a tying motion, and the stalk affixed itself to the branch of a tree overlooking the water. One kid jumped on, using the sunflower head as a pommel seat to swing himself into the lake.

Aria watched the scene with equal parts fascination and fear. Who were these people who could wield their Outbursts with such calm precision and skill? There was no ugly release of emotion like Aria let out in the chambers every morning. None of the raw, uncontrollable wildness of her Outbursts. It was like they had real-life superpowers.

“You can join us if you want to,” an older teen with dark hair said as he approached Aria. There was a daisy on his cloak. “We don’t bite.”

It was only then that Aria noticed the intricate knot charm hanging from his waist, long silky tassels flowing from it. She frowned. Where had she seen that before? It looked familiar, but she couldn’t quite place it. She thought back to her lessons at Resthaven . . . Something to do with preventing dreams? No, that wasn’t it. Something to do with historical methods of capturing—

She gasped and stumbled back as awareness dawned on her. “That’s a B-Beast catcher!” she stuttered.

The boy cocked his head. “Not quite.”

Aria’s mind spun. “Yes, it is! We learned all about them. And the only people stupid enough to use them are—” Her eyes

widened. "You're a royal slinger from the Kingdom of Royal Hanguk, aren't you? But how? You're a hermit kingdom. You guys aren't allowed to leave."

"And yet here we are."

Aria took another step back. The Kingdom of Royal Hanguk was a tiny country nestled on an island inside Seoul, known for its disproportionate population of dreamslingers and for their decision to live completely isolated from the rest of the world. Little was known about them, but their king governed the Royal League of Dreamslingers, which trained teenagers to harness and wield their Outbursts.

You'd think that was an enviable skill, except that the controversial training involved catching dream Beasts from the Nightmare Circle and pulling them back into the real world. And this put young dreamslingers – and the general public – at great risk. In an interview, her dad had once likened the League's methods to giving loaded guns to young people. Except worse, because the young people were being turned *into* loaded guns.

The boy looked down at Aria's armband and paused. "You could be a hero, you know."

"You mean like *you*?" she spat. "You can't be a hero if you're already the villain."

"You'll find that depends on whom you're asking."

Aria's gaze flitted down to his tasselled knot charm again, and the boy lifted it up for her to see.

"It's where we house them," he explained. He chanted something that sounded like "*Suri suri masuri*."

Aria blinked, and suddenly, a giant dragon with rose petals for scales was standing next to him. Aria screamed and leapt back.

“There’s no need for that.” He jumped on the Beast’s back with a well-practised ease, and the long, wingless dragon let out a hiss. “My name is Tae and this is Jaya. He’s a bloom dragon.”

When Aria merely gaped in response, he continued. “Having the genetic mutation doesn’t make you a villain — it makes you an exception. The Royal League could help you become *exceptional*. Remember that.”

For a split second, Aria was so caught up in the moment that she found herself nodding along. But then her senses returned, and she remembered why this all looked too good to be true. Because it *was*.

After all, the Royal League of Dreamslingers were the ones who caused the Great Outburst ten years ago. The hermit kingdom had suddenly sent hundreds of their young royal slingers on a world tour, to showcase their controversial abilities to the public. They claimed it was a diplomatic effort to help dispel negative myths about the League, and to build positive public sentiment towards dreamslingers — royal or otherwise; to show the world that dreamslingers’ powers were a force for *good*.

But that’s not what happened. By the time the contingent arrived in Texas, they’d been pushed beyond their limits and were exhausted. A fight broke out between some royal slingers and a group of local protestors, which sparked a mass conflict. What resulted was a series of fires, ice storms, hurricanes and poisonous plagues that ravaged multiple cities and took thousands of innocent lives. Including Aria’s mom’s.

At the thought of her mom, fresh grief seeped into Aria’s bones. Since the Great Outburst, hardly any royal slingers had been seen outside the hermit kingdom.

Until now.

"Hey, kid, be careful!" a royal slinger shouted as one of the local kids swung himself too eagerly on the sunflower rope swing, almost colliding headfirst with the ice slide.

"This is incredible!" the boy cried, ignoring the warning and going for another, bigger swing.

Another slinger summoned his Tiger Beast and used his wind Outburst to pull the floating ice sheet closer to the shore. But at the same time, the one who'd made the sunflower rope swing lassoed the stalk around the boy's body, dropping him into the water. Unfortunately, the marriage of the two actions resulted in the boy suddenly being dropped, not into the lake, but onto the hard ice. His head struck the sharp edge of the floe with a sickening crack. Blood began to pool under his head.

Aria screamed.

She suddenly understood her dad's analogy. The problem with becoming a human loaded gun was that you didn't have to *want* to hurt people to still be able to hurt them. There were many ways to pull a trigger.

Quickly, she sprinted back to the carpark to find someone to call an ambulance. A man there complied, but not before he muttered under his breath.

"Human abominations."

It was only when she caught him sneering at her armband that she realised he wasn't talking about the royal slingers. He was talking about *her*.

"It wasn't me!" she shouted, feeling indignant. "I didn't hurt him. It was *them*. I'm different, I promise. I'm not like them at all!"

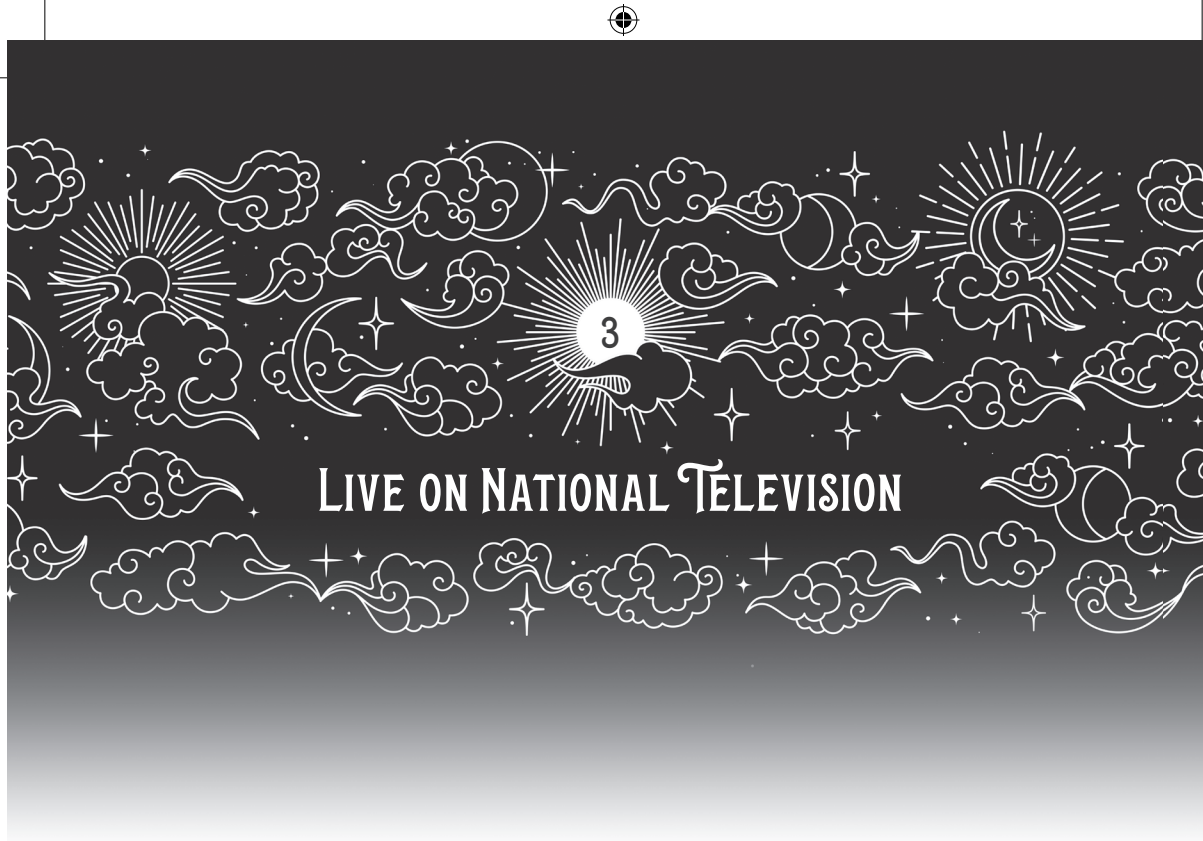
The man looked at her with pity, which only made her fume even more. Soon, her fingers were sparking with heat from a ballooning Outburst, and she gritted her teeth. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing her lose control.

Restrain. Contain. Maintain.

It was like her dad always said. A wise person allowed some battles to be lost in order to win the war. And this guy? He wasn't worth the fight.

Checking that the injured boy was being looked after, Aria turned and ran. She put all trace of stupid ignorant haters and of weird royal slingers out of her mind. Because for the briefest moment, she'd almost forgotten. Today, back at Resthaven, she and her dad were about to win a real war.

And *that* was something worth fighting for.



ARIA KNEW SHE HAD TO FIND HER DAD. THE TIMING OF THESE ROYAL slingers suddenly appearing in Almiro today was too coincidental for it to be an accident. She needed to warn him. But her dad had left this morning to meet the governor and the commissioner, and she didn't have a phone.

"Dr D!" Aria cried as she burst through the front doors of Resthaven. "We need to call my dad. *Please*, it's urgent!"

Dr Dixon didn't even hear her. He was too busy corralling the residents in the entrance atrium, getting them ready for the big welcome. Everyone milled about nervously in their Sunday finest and on their best behaviour. Well, almost.

"Juno, go put your gloves on *now*!" Dr Dixon barked, as one of the residents accidentally released a poison Outburst, shooting a jet of acid from her hands. It landed at the entrance, burning a hole through the welcome mat.

The doctor rushed to hide the smoking mat behind the

reception desk, his face reddening. "If you'd extracted properly like I told you this morning, you wouldn't be losing control!" he yelled. "Go get your restraints *immediately*."

"Dr D," Aria tried again, waving a hand in front of his face. "I really need to call my dad. It's about the ceremony, and it's *really* important he knows that—"

"Aria Loveridge!" he scolded her, his eyes narrowing as he took her in. "I expected better from you. Where have you been? And why are you sweating like that? You look like you've been wrestling with a bush!"

Before she could explain, he gasped and shoved her out of the way as the delegation's limousine came to a stop outside the main doors.

"Everybody, in position! They're here!" he cried.

Aria felt like she was standing on hot coals as she watched a tall, angular man and a short, plump man step out of the vehicle, accompanied by a small entourage of officials. Her panic rose further as a mob of camera people leapt out from the van behind them, their equipment in tow. Finally, Aria's dad appeared from one of the cars in the convoy.

"Dad!" Aria cried, at the same time as Dr Dixon rushed forwards to shake the VIPs' hands.

The doctor shot daggers at her over his shoulder before he cooed at his guests. "Welcome to Resthaven, Governor Miller, Commissioner Reid! Please, do come in. Let us take you on a tour of our humble premises."

"*Dad!*" Aria yelled louder this time, waving her hands over her head as the doctor led the entourage into the atrium. "Dad, I have to tell you something. I was at the Sunflower—"

"Aria," her dad said calmly but firmly as the commissioner and governor gazed curiously at her. "Are you sure this is the best time?"

He raised an eyebrow as he walked past, and Aria knew it was a warning. If there was any day she needed to *restrain, contain, maintain*, it was today. But Aria also knew that this news was too important not to share. The entire live-streamed announcement could be at risk.

"But, *Dad*, you don't understand, this is urgent!" With her blood pumping, she cut in front of the sharp-featured commissioner's path to get to her dad. "Just before when I was at the Fields, I saw—"

"Argh!" The commissioner tripped over Aria, and some document-carrying officials rushed to help him to his feet. A few papers slipped from one of their folios, just in time for the rotund governor to step on it. His footing slipped, and he, too, fell to the ground with a shuddering thud. He groaned in pain.

The entire entourage froze, and her dad swivelled to face her, his expression heavy with embarrassment. "Aria, *please!*"

Realising what she'd done, Aria took a step back. "I'm sorry," she whispered, shame burning her face. "I didn't mean to, I just—I just needed you to know that—"

"Enough is *enough*," her dad admonished, and the look of disappointment on his face was enough for the words to disappear straight back into Aria's mouth. "I don't know what's gotten into you, but now is *not* the time, do you hear me?"

Aria shrank back. She could count on one hand the number of times her dad had used this tone with her, and that's how she knew there was no way she was getting through to him now.

She swallowed back the tears and nodded meekly. She was just going to have to cross all her fingers and toes that the royal slingers being in town was an unfortunate coincidence.

"Make sure you keep your distance from our VIPs," Dr Dixon hissed as he walked past her. "There are *cameras*, for god's sake!"

Aria made herself scarce as the tour progressed, but noted how the commissioner and governor nodded approvingly as her dad explained the rationale behind Resthaven's programmes. Thankfully, it seemed they'd forgiven him for his daughter's misdeeds.

By the time the group entered the auditorium for the true purpose of the visit, Aria's nerves had begun to settle. Everything was proceeding as it should. Despite her earlier faux pas, they were on the home stretch now. Everything was going to be okay.

The governor and commissioner sat at the signing table, while the camera crew set up in front of the stage and at the back of the auditorium. When everyone was seated in the audience, Aria's dad walked up to the podium, his wooden cane clicking against the floor. Aria sat in the front row so she could beam up at him.

"Ten years ago, I lost my dear wife to the Great Outburst, just as many of you lost loved ones, too. The truth is, we all lost someone or something that day."

The cameras panned over his leg, as if to illustrate his personal loss. He'd suffered horrific burns trying to save Aria's mom.

"But over the last decade, I have embarked on a comprehensive fact-finding mission. My research has proven that criminalising and incarcerating our gene-compromised population is not the answer. It merely masks the symptoms, which only kicks the problem farther down the road. The only way to solve our

national dreamslinger crisis is to embrace radical compassion. We must care for our most vulnerable in society, and in doing so, help all of humanity.”

He gazed out at the audience of residents before him. “Look around you, the proof is right here. Resthaven has directly contributed to a ninety percent decrease in Outburst-related incidents in Almiro – we now have the lowest in the state, and the lowest, in fact, in the entire country. And it brings me nothing but pride that from today we will be able to apply this proven, science-backed approach to every state in our great nation.”

There was a thundering round of applause, and Aria at the front was the loudest by far.

Governor Miller and Commissioner Reid both made short remarks, and then the government officials prepared the paperwork for them to sign. The cameras homed in on the signing table, where shiny pens were waiting to deliver the country into a new era of dreamslinger welfare.

“And now, the moment we’ve all been waiting for,” Aria’s dad announced. “I invite the governor and the commissioner to sign the National Dreamslinger Home Rollout agreeem—”

He was interrupted by a teenager in a daisy-symbolled cloak bursting through the doors of the auditorium. Accompanying him was a giant Dragon Beast whose scales were made of rose petals. Aria’s blood stilled.

“What the—?” her dad breathed into the mic.

The royal slinger, who Aria recognised as Tae from the Sunflower Fields, strode confidently up the aisle as the cameras swivelled hungrily, lapping up the confusion in the room.

Seeing her dad’s panicked face, Aria quickly searched for the

guards. But then she remembered. There *were* no guards. It had been an intentional decision to make a statement to the public — that the gene-compromised didn't need policing. Dreamslinger Homes were peaceful places. They hadn't considered outside interference.

Tae and his bloom dragon stopped in front of the cameras and turned to face the audience.

"I'm sorry to burst in unannounced, but I have come to relay an important message from His Royal Majesty, King Lee Ogu, from the Kingdom of Royal Hanguk."

The entire auditorium stilled. Even the cameras seemed to stop breathing.

"For the first time in history, the Royal League of Dreamslingers will be opening up its Annual Royal Slinger Trials to any teenager with the genetic mutation, regardless of one's birthplace, ancestry or creed."

Aria gasped, along with everyone else. On the stage, her dad's eyes bulged.

"It will be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the gene-blessed to compete on equal standing with our own, for a chance to harness the gene and to reap the many riches of the Asleep."

As if in response, the bloom dragon opened its mouth and summoned a giant grapefruit-sized orb in its jaws. It was a dazzling violet globe with golden lightning streaks swimming through it. The Beast pointed its snout in Tae's direction and released its jaws, hurling the orb at its human.

On impact, a shimmering aura of a spider appeared around the royal slinger, and then, unbelievably, Tae began growing additional arms. Each one was hairy and distinctly arachnid-esque, and

they continued to sprout until there were eight of them, each moving with its own agency.

The audience shrieked, and one of the officials fainted on the spot. The stout governor began praying loudly from the stage. Aria lost her ability to think clearly. What *was* that violet orb? Had Tae really just grown spider arms?

“As you can see, there are *exceptional* powers available to those who are successful in the competition.” Tae’s eyes lingered on Aria. “Furthermore, those who pass the Trials will be inducted as Fellows of the Royal League and be granted lifetime citizenship of the kingdom. The Trials will begin without delay on August seventh, but all those interested must first register their attendance via scroll.”

Aria blinked, and hundreds of tiny scrolls rained down from the ceiling. Her dad started making a beeline for Tae.

“As you may or may not be aware, no electronics are permitted within kingdom borders. But appropriate communication channels will be provided to every trialeer upon arrival. Does anyone have any questions?”

The unexpected call for questions jolted Aria back to her senses. She looked around, and it dawned on her that the situation was even worse than it looked. This entire encounter was being live-streamed on national television. All her dad’s hard work was being sabotaged by the Royal League for their own dangerous interests. She could *not* let this go on.

She bolted to her feet. But her dad beat her to Tae.

“This is not the place, young man.” He pointed his cane at the royal slinger, the colourful cosy she’d crocheted for the stick on full display. “Please, leave now. We have heard enough.”

It was a peaceful request, but the bloom dragon took offence at the cane being pointed in Tae's direction. It hissed protectively before swiping its long muscular tail towards the professor. It whacked her dad's legs with full force, and he collapsed with a painful thud on the ground.

"DAD!"

White-hot fury flared in Aria's gut like the sparkler she was. How *dare* they touch him!

Before she knew what was happening, a torrent of fire was shooting out of her hands, raw and potent and full of rage. A nearby cameraman's legs caught alight, and he shrieked and flailed about, toppling his tripod and spreading the flames to the rest of the camera crew.

Aria gasped and hid her hands behind her back. *No, no, no!* That wasn't supposed to happen. Not today! A thick silence spread through the auditorium as all eyes landed on Aria. She took in their horrified expressions, the blood draining from her face. What had she done?

As she stood there frozen, one opportunistic cameraperson swivelled their lens towards Aria, eager to capture the culprit on film. Immediately, Aria's dad leapt in front of her, blocking the camera's view with his body.

"Turn that thing off. *NOW.*"

Aria dared to glance at her dad, who'd turned to check on her. Their eyes met, and Aria's heart shattered. His disappointment was spelled so clearly in his red-rimmed eyes, she knew she'd crossed a line that could never be uncrossed. Against all her best intentions, she'd somehow, with one fell swoop, made her dad's legacy and reputation go up, literally, in smoke.



By the time the ambulances and fire trucks left, the real fire at Resthaven was just beginning to burn.

“How *dare* you let this happen, Professor Loveridge!” the governor shouted, his round face red and blotchy. His voice reverberated around the walls of her dad’s office. “I have never, do you hear me, *never*, in my career experienced such a PR disaster. Were you aware the royal slinger would make an appearance?”

From Aria’s hiding spot behind the filing cabinet, she could see her dad carefully arrange his face so his emotions couldn’t be read. It was one of the Outburst suppression techniques taught at Resthaven.

“Absolutely not, Governor,” her dad responded, a forced calm in his tone. “It was news to me that they were even in the country, let alone in Almiro.”

Aria wanted to scream. She’d tried to tell him! If only he’d listened!

“And what of that offensive child who had the Outburst?” the commissioner demanded, his nasal voice as thin as his physique. “I hope she’ll be dealt with accordingly.” It was clear he had no idea Aria was the same person who’d tripped him up earlier.

“That was my *daughter*,” her dad snapped, his body visibly tensing. “And I would warn you in future to mind your choice of words, Commissioner.”

“You do understand you’ve put us in a rather difficult situation,” the commissioner remarked, unaffected by her dad’s warning. “After the abject humiliation we just experienced on national television, surely you don’t expect us to support the rollout now?”

Her dad swallowed thickly. "I would, in fact, argue this incites even greater urgency for the rollout. If the Royal League is suddenly opening their borders again, we need to be prepared. The last time they emerged it resulted in the Great Outburst. We need to ensure our gene-compromised don't get indoctrinated into their extremist ways."

The governor sighed heavily. "It's a valid point. We wouldn't be able to survive another Great Outburst. Not after what they did to us last time."

The commissioner scowled as he fingered the vase of flowers on her dad's desk.

"The problem is that we have no idea what they're up to," the governor continued in a huff. "It's like trying to provide an answer when you don't know what the question is!"

As the governor waffled on with his stream of consciousness, the commissioner stared at the flowers with an eerie intensity. And then, out of nowhere, he ripped an entire dahlia head off its stalk, crushing it inside his fist. He mumbled something about bleeding flowers.

"What was that?" the governor asked.

"I said we'll send someone to find out," the commissioner replied.

"Why in the world would we do that?" The governor looked confused.

The commissioner spoke slowly as if explaining something to a small child. "You said it yourself – we don't know what they're plotting. And if this is the first time they're opening the Trials to any dreamslinger in the world, we need someone on the inside. Someone who can infiltrate the system, find out what they're

doing and prove the League is up to no good. Someone who can find evidence. Undercover.”

The governor mulled it over before his eyes lit up. “And if we can show proof that they’re planning anything akin to another Great Outburst, our skins will be saved. It’s the perfect scapegoat. I can see the headlines now – Governor of Texas saves world from Great Outburst Two!” He chuckled heartily and slapped the commissioner on the shoulder, who bristled at the gesture. “You’re a genius, Reid! My only criticism is that I didn’t think of it myself!”

Aria’s dad shook his head fervently. “There’s no way we’re sending anyone into that lion’s den. They create child soldiers. They teach vulnerable youth to wield their emotions as weapons. We have a duty to protect our young people.”

The look on the commissioner’s face could’ve chilled the sun. “Send someone and get the proof we need,” he said icily. “Or else say goodbye to your national rollout. In fact, you might as well say goodbye to Resthaven while you’re at it, too.”

Her dad’s face crumpled. “But—”

“I’ll do it!” Aria cried, revealing herself from behind the filing cabinet. “I’ll go to the Trials. I’ll be your spy and find the proof you need.”

Her dad’s eyes flared, exposing a fury she’d never seen in him before. “Like hell you will!” he growled. “That hermit kingdom doesn’t recognise international laws. The US doesn’t even have official diplomatic relations with them! If something terrible happened to you there, we’d have no legal recourse to bring you back. Do you see what I’m trying to say? This would be a suicide mission!”

"I beg to differ," the commissioner replied, his tone steely. "I would argue this is rather a beautiful solution to our little predicament."

The governor nodded a little too eagerly. "It's the least she could do after today."

It was clear by the look on her dad's face that he knew her fate had been sealed. Still, he didn't let up.

"But this is not how we do things in America," he argued hotly. "We protect our own. How can you support sending a minor into what is essentially enemy territory?" He wrung his hands. "Please, I implore you to have mercy. She's my daughter!"

The commissioner cleared his throat. "You forget legislation stipulates that any gene-compromised minor is ultimately the responsibility of the state, not their parent."

"Oh, precisely," the governor quickly agreed. "So I'm afraid, Professor, it's not your decision as to whether this child enters the Trials or not. As governor of Texas, it's mine."

Her dad stared into Aria's eyes with a look of utter fear that chilled her to the bone. *What have you done?* it demanded. Aria knew he'd never forgive her for this. And yet she felt her chest fill with a dark sort of satisfaction.

This was going to be her penance for ruining her dad's career, his legacy and his reputation. This was the only way she could salvage what was left of it.

Her dad couldn't see it yet. But Aria was going to compete in the Annual Royal Slinger Trials in the Kingdom of Royal Hanguk. And by proving they were guilty, she was going to fix everything she'd burned.