

Title: Liar's Fun

Soundtrack link:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLzTFIfCgSuEhJgEWw_n7OlxHP-zhegom-

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The performance ended with deafening applause from the audience. The dimmed light from the bar roared to life, signalling the intermission. Patrons sitting in the dark wandered up to get drinks. Likewise, ULTRAVIOLET's dancers did the same. Aria, eager to get away from the cramped backstage, passed her manager, slumped against the doorway. He gave her and the group a weary glance, which she responded to with an innocent smile. They made their way to the seating area, passing near the front of the stage and some half-empty round tables. Right at the front sat someone very familiar to Aria: Julian Aphelion the all-round snake, looking infuriatingly pleased with himself. She found herself glaring at him, hatred clogging her throat. Her sub-leader, Lili, put her hand on her shoulder, looking up at her with a knowing expression, and steered her away from his table, where she was sure she would've tried to fight him. Everyone knew Aria's hatred of Julian Aphelion, and she knew everyone else's. He was a serial liar, cheater, the list went on. Aria tried to forget seeing him.

At the bar, one of their guards made a space for priority access. A few rich kids were sitting on the plush stools trying to impress the visibly tired and annoyed bartender, her face hidden by shadows on one side and illuminated by harsh light on the other. She moved to serve them and another young woman in a sleek and stylish dress, who took two drinks and left. As she turned to serve them, the bar was plunged into darkness with the sound of smashing glass. There were gasps, accompanied by cheering. Someone turned another set of lights on, and Aria saw the lads looking pleased with themselves, the table covered in spilled drinks and the ground littered with broken glass. An employee started to clean their mess.

"Maya!"

The bartender looked apologetically at them and left to help. Meanwhile, one of the guards came back up to ULTRAVIOLET.

"Sorry, everyone. Your manager wants you all to come backstage to discuss the next routine." He motioned them away, offering an apologetic face to their complaints. They passed back near Aphelion's table, where he had left his drinks.

Backstage, Aria and her group-members found themselves more interested in watching the crowd through the heavy plum curtains than listening to their manager, who prattled on about fixing their form. Aria felt her eyes being drawn to Aphelion again. She hadn't been in this proximity to him since their last day at school together, when he'd stolen her chances of a better life right before her. He knew that she knew, and that she hated him. She noticed the woman from the bar slide into the seat beside him and refill his glass before passing it back, smiling expectantly. He ignored her. For a second, Aria saw her expression darken before she regained her composure and took out her phone.

The music started, fast paced and rhythmic. The audience hushed, watching them intently. Aria kept her thoughts away from Aphelion, focusing on getting the steps and motions of the dance perfect. It was going well, and she almost lost herself in the art until she heard persistent coughing coming from below her. She glanced down and saw Aphelion take a sip of his drink before another cough wracked through him. He turned beetroot, and then began to gasp, stifling breaths coming out. She froze, watching him fall to the carpet. The woman he was with screamed, and then the rest of the theatre erupted into chaos. The music stopped. Aria felt herself being pulled off stage, but not before she heard someone yell "He's not breathing!"

Detective Hayes stood in the hall of the Royal Athena theatre a week later. Around him, the room was frozen in time: glasses left half-empty on the tables, chairs pulled out and fallen over, shards littering the floor. The soft crimson carpet was dark with stains, the few lights on harsh and glaring. He stepped over some of the glass before coming to rest near where Julian Aphelion had died. The paramedics had pronounced him dead on arrival. Then the police got involved and the case was deemed murder. Healthy young men with no history of illness and a controversial public image didn't just drop dead of natural causes. Within a few hours the Aphelion family was calling in private detectives and forensics. His profile of notorious solved cases and glowing reputation had stood out, so now he was tasked with finding out what had happened to the Aphelion heir. No big deal, right? He'd solved hundreds of cases. It wasn't like he couldn't figure it out. His career wasn't on the line.

"Detective!" He heard the sound of running footsteps. Turning, he saw a junior detective leaping over chairs towards him with a massive file.

"What is it? Spit it out, and be careful!" The detective didn't necessarily like working with other people: they messed up his thinking process and took too much credit for his work.

Panting, the junior he recognised as Bronwyn Gonzalez straightened up, red in the face. “The toxicology reports came back: he was poisoned.” She took a moment. “And the transcripts of the interviews came back. We couldn’t find you in the office, so we decided to cut down the list without you.”

“Well?” Hayes sighed.

“There are seven primary suspects: they’re the only ones who could’ve done it. The bartender, the dancers that night, and his girlfriend who was with him. It sounds stupid but they’re all connected to him!”

“What did the forensics find?”

Gonzalez hesitated. “There’s one problem, sir. They all have *solid* alibis for that night, but still could’ve slipped something into his drink and got rid of the evidence. They all have strong motives: we can’t cut anyone because his glass was smashed when he fell, and it got mixed up in the aftermath. You see, they all could have done it.”

Word count: 999