

~Deleted Scene: Seren's Interference~

Aiden rested his hand on my lower back to guide me into the dark passageway, but before we could slip inside, a cold voice yanked us to a stop.

"Running away, Aiden? How unlike you."

We spun around to see Princess Seren standing regally at the top of the stairs, dressed in a gown of ruby silk and gold that matched the fiery triumph flashing in her eyes. Aiden groaned.

"What now, Seren?"

She stepped forward, eyes narrowed at Aiden. "You're supposed to be at the ball."

"I have more pressing matters to attend to." Aiden's hand slid down my arm to entwine with mine.

"Something more pressing than your duty?"

"What is duty compared to matters of the heart? Why should I continue this charade when I've already found the woman for me?"

"So you're determined to choose her?" Princess Seren's smirk turned mocking as she looked me up and down. "There's nothing special about her."

Aiden's entire manner hardened. "She's perfect."

"She's a peasant," Princess Seren said. "No matter how much you've tried to polish her, a rock can never become a diamond."

I flinched and Aiden's arm looped around me to hold me close. I melted against his protection, against him; trusting him, needing him. Princess Seren's smirk widened at my nervous reaction.

"Your distress only confirms my suspicions—you're an imposter. It's unfortunate your secret was discovered. Don't you realize posing as royalty is a crime punishable by death?"

My blood chilled and Aiden's hold tightened. "You can't hurt her," he said. "If anyone should be punished it's me. I'm the one who told the lie."

"But she played along."

Aiden clenched his jaw. "I won't let you hurt her."

Princess Seren cocked an elegant brow. "You truly believe you can prevent me from sharing this with His Majesty? You trying to stop me will leave your little pretender vulnerable."

Aiden's jaw tightened further as he glowered at her. "Fine, do what you will. While you're tattling like the little nuisance you are I'm taking Eileen to safety. I should have done it long ago." He led me further down into the dank passageway.

"Don't expect me to make excuses to explain your absence at the ball," Princess Seren called after us. "His Majesty will be most displeased."

Aiden didn't even slow. As we reached the bottom step, above us the fountain shifted and slowly slid back into place. Before it closed, I glanced over my shoulder at the princess, staring after us with her brow furrowed in puzzlement. Her expression hardened when she met my gaze. With a flick of her hair she strutted away just as the passage closed with a resonating *thud*, swallowing us up in darkness.

I shivered and Aiden soothingly rubbed my arms. "Are you alright?"

I burrowed my face against his chest with a whimper. "What's going to happen to me?"

"Nothing. I'll take you home where you'll be safe before returning to deal with Seren and the King."

Calm enveloped me. Unlike when he'd first spoken those words earlier this evening, this time I believed them.

Despite the smothering darkness surrounding us, Aiden found his way easily, as if he'd traversed this route many times. I clung to his hand and trusted in each step he took. The passage wasn't long and soon the ground began to slope upward. At the top, Aiden pushed a hidden nob embedded into the stone wall. The ceiling shifted and opened up to the sunset-shrouded sky and the familiar trees of the Forest towering over us, my old friends.