

Portions of this scene made it into the final manuscript, but this was the original scene.

~Deleted Scene: Playing with Stories~

"It feels so good to be out of the palace," Eileen whispered to me as we strolled arm in arm through the Forest, a mischievous enchanted forest whose pathways constantly shifted, but which unfolded obediently to lead us to today's destination.

Admittedly, I felt the same, but the thought felt far too foreign in my mind to dwell on, for shouldn't I prefer the palace to any other destination? "I'm thrilled to see where you're taking me."

"It's the setting of the first outing I went on with Aiden. You'll love it." Eileen squeezed my arm affectionately and tipped her head back to stare at the canopy of branches above us with a content smile. "This portion of the Forest changes its seasons on a whim. Last time we came it looked like autumn. I wish you could have seen it, Rosie."

"You forget, darling, that we're the Forest's sovereigns. Rosalina can see it now." As he spoke, the trees around us transformed, their leaves changing their colors, the green melting away to be replaced with ruby and gold. It was truly lovely.

The setting caused my mind to stir to life once more, and my imagination—waiting patiently in the wings—took center stage as a story danced through my thoughts. The location we were visiting was an enchanted place, one whose magic was most prevalent in autumn, just as the Forest prepared for its winter slumber. Here many lovers visited to make the most romantic promise to give their hearts to one another, to cherish one another forever and never be separated. One couple in particular...

"Rosie?"

I was torn from my most beautiful of stories just before it got to the good part when I entered the tale to exchange my own precious vows with my true love. I turned to Eileen, forehead furrowed as she stared at me. I blinked rapidly in an attempt to ground myself back to reality, a most difficult task when my unfinished story—yearning to continue being told—attempted to tug my attention away.

Suddenly, *he* stepped forward, bridging the discreet guarding distance he'd been maintaining with Guard Duncan. His honey-lemon scent enveloped me as he leaned towards my ear.

"Her Highness just asked you what you thought of your destination, where you've just arrived. I suggest the following dialogue response: it's positively enchanting, the perfect place to have developed your fairy tale romance."

Without thought, I obeyed him. "Oh Eileen, it's positively enchanting, the perfect place to have developed your fairy tale romance."

"I knew you'd love it." Eileen's gaze drifted to *him*, still hovering on my other side. "What did Alastar tell you?"

"Nothing of consequence."

She shrugged and released my arm to allow Aiden to lead her away and our location finally came into focus. We stood in the middle of a grove of apple trees surrounding us in a halo, their fruit a garland of rubies against the green leaves. I gasped and pressed my hand to my heart.

"Oh Eileen," I called after her. She paused to look back at me. "This place is utterly enchanting. What the perfect setting for the development of your fairy tale romance. No wonder you and Aiden fell in love."

She smiled, bemused. "You said that already but I'm glad you think so." She turned her attention to the trees. "I'm surprised the trees are already bearing fruit; it's only early summer."

"It's an enchanted forest, darling, and since you two are such good friends, it's likely trying to please you by growing your favorite fruit." Aiden plucked one of the apples and tossed it towards her. She caught it with a smile.

I turned towards my rescuer. "How did you know how I'd respond to Eileen if I'd been paying attention?"

He tilted his head, amusement dancing in his eyes. "I'll present several scenarios and you can choose the one you like best: I read ahead in *The Tale of Rosalina*, I read your mind, I used my villain powers to force you to give the response I wanted, or simply because you're quite predictable once one has become acquainted with that delightful mind of yours...unless one doesn't know what story you're currently playing out, then you become entirely *unpredictable*."

I tapped my lips with my finger. "While all those seem likely, I'm going to choose that you read my mind, considering you've done it many times before."

He cocked his eyebrow. "Are you suggesting I conducted the same mischief twice? It would make me a poorly constructed character in your story to be as unoriginal as *that*."

"True, we can't have flat characters in *my* story, but considering you seem to be uncreative—your obsession with dragons is indication of that—it also *fits* your character to utilize the same villainous methods over and over, wouldn't you say?"

His lips twitched. "You're always fun, Rosalina."

I beamed. "I must thank you for rescuing me after I'd become lost in my imagination."

"Since I rescued you, might I receive a token for my services?"

"And what do you desire, oh noble knight?"

He leaned forward, his hazel eyes bright with eagerness, and once again the lemon scent that was so *Alastar* overcame my senses. I instinctively leaned closer, allowing it to embrace me.

"I want to know the story you were imagining when I came to your aide. Seems only fair you should tell me."

I looked around the clearing. Guard Duncan leaned against an apple tree, munching on one of its stolen fruit as he properly monitored Aiden and Eileen, while Eileen sat in a swing that hung from the bough of the largest tree in the center and Aiden gently pushed her. *Alastar* and I were essentially alone.

Another glimpse at *Alastar's* wide hazel eyes melted me. "I was interrupted before I could compose a complete story, but I did imagine a setting whose magic brings together true love. Unfortunately, I haven't worked out the finer points."

Alastar rested his chin on his fist thoughtfully before he snapped his fingers. "I have it." He pointed towards the apple tree bearing the swing. "The fruit from that particular tree is enchanted."

"With a love spell?" I cocked my own eyebrow. "I thought you didn't believe in those?"

"I don't; nothing can fabricate such a precious emotion. Rather, these apples are enchanted to illuminate the partaker's feelings."

I clasped my hands together in sheer delight. "An illuminating spell that unlocks the secrets of one's heart." What an utterly romantic thought.

Alastar leaned closer. I shivered as his warm breath caressed my skin. "When you finish your tale, I'd love for you to tell it to me. But speaking of stories..." He gave me a knowing *look* and I grinned.

"Have you finished *Tales of Magic and Romance to Enchant the Heart*?"

His lips twitched. "I knew you were a little mind reader. While I haven't finished it, I've read most of the stories."

I clasped my hands in delight. "Do tell me what you think of it."

"Hmm...well, as predicted, it's sappy. Do you really enjoy such superficial love?"

"It's not superficial," I snapped, already immensely disappointed in his reaction.

"The affection seems rather shallow. Shouldn't genuine love focus more at one's inner beauty? I must admit I'm disappointed to learn you enjoy reading about such shallow love when I hoped you'd be one who looked deeper."

A vulnerable look filled his eyes. I tilted my head, studying it. "It bothers you, doesn't it, when people fail to see beyond appearances."

"Oh, well..." He suddenly seemed quite preoccupied with the sky. "I'm just afraid... I mean, most people judge a book by its cover without even bothering to read the book."

Sympathy washed over me as I discovered this insight into Alastar. "Are you afraid girls will judge you by your cover and choose not to read your story?"

His blush deepened as he kicked his toe into the dirt. "I've been told that I possess a not very attractive cover. Growing up, I've always been compared to my brother, and not in a flattering way."

I glanced towards Duncan, still attentively watching Aiden and Eileen, who now sat together at the base of the apple tree deep in conversation. He was admittedly, by all accounts, dark-haired and handsome, and yet...not particularly appealing to me. I glanced back at Alastar, who was definitely *not* handsome, but how I loved being around him.

"You don't look much alike," I ventured. Alastar sighed defeatedly.

"So I've been told."

I glanced back and forth between them, finding myself lingering less on Duncan and more on Alastar. I lightly rested my hand on his arm and although he jolted at my touch, he didn't pull away. "It bothers you?"

"It's never bothered me before, really, until...recently, I suppose." He was now looking all around the clearing, everywhere, that is, except for at me.

"Oh, I wish it wouldn't," I said. "If it means anything, I find you attractive."

His gaze suddenly snapped to mine, his hazel eyes wide. "Don't lie, I know I'm not attractive. It shouldn't matter. It *doesn't* matter." He let out a long sigh. "It never *did* matter." He peeked back at me, cheeks crimson, eyes rather shy. "You really think so?"

I rested my chin on my hand to study him. "Yes."

And I did. He wasn't handsome by any means but I didn't mind. He was fun, sweet, and imaginative, with the most gorgeous eyes that were literally the windows to his soul and the ability to make me smile. His features were rough and serious while also seeming soft, especially in his lip twitching smiles. I nodded, confirming my own opinion.

"I like the way you look, especially as I've read your book and am enjoying it immensely. I want to keep reading it." I stepped closer and lightly traced around his eyes. "Your eyes are my favorite, especially when they show your emotions and help me read you better."

His eyes lit up as his lips curved up into a real smile. It pleased me how much my words touched him. "You're really sweet, Rosie."

A strange thrill rippled over me at his use of my nickname. "As are you. It's the reason we're friends despite my deciding quite determinedly to hate all guards forever."

Up went his eyebrow. "Why is that?"

"Because when I first came to the palace, I thought all the guards were the Dark Prince's minions bent on performing his evil deeds. Thus when I met you, it was your role that prevented me from initially reading your book."

"Ah, I was the wrong genre. I'm glad you gave me a try anyway."

"And I'm glad you gave me a try, even if fairy tales aren't your preferred genre." I sighed. "Please don't feel compelled to finish *Tales of Magic and Romance to Enchant the Heart* if you don't want to."

"I'm not disliking it by any means, I'm just surprised that the romance is so superficial."

"But it's not," I protested. "You need to read it more closely."

"Then perhaps I should give it a reread before I return it."

I smiled, pleased by his willingness. "Which is your favorite story?"

"I didn't like 'The Tale of the Witch and the Love Potion' at all, as I knew I wouldn't, but I really enjoyed, 'The Tale of the Princess and Her Prince in Disguise.'"

"Oo, that one is splendid, even if the heroine is a bit daft. Who wouldn't recognize true love when it's staring them in the face?"

Cue his eyebrow lift. "Who indeed?"

He studied me for a moment before he wandered over to the tree that we'd pretended grew enchanted fruit. He plucked an apple from it and used a dagger from his boot to cut it in half. He returned and held a piece out for me while keeping the other for himself. I stared first at it, then up at him.

"What's this for?"

"I thought it'd be wise for you to see the secrets of your heart before following through with your disastrous plot."

I hesitantly took the fruit. Without breaking eye contact with me, he took a bite from his own piece. I watched him with bated breath. "Does it work?"

He swallowed and examined the fruit before meeting my gaze once more. "I do believe it does. Everything seems a bit more clear now."

"In what way?" I leaned closer, eager for his answer. He motioned towards my own apple half.

"Don't leave me in suspense. Eat yours."

I did. The apple was an explosion of juicy and sweet flavor. Alastar's gaze intensified as he gave me a searching look, as if hoping to discover something.

"Well?"

A stirring of *something* prickled my heart as I met his eyes but I found myself pushing it away, focusing determinedly on an image of the dashing Prince Liam. "I still think Prince Liam is my prince."

He sighed and frowned at the apple piece in my hand. "You got a bad apple."

I folded my arms. "If you don't like what's in my heart, why did you ask?"

His frown deepened as he searched my gaze. "No, it's this ridiculous plot of yours you seem so determined to write that I don't like. Do you like ending up in messes of your own making, Rosalina?"

I tightened my jaw. "Falling in love is anything but a mess. Obstacles are a part of every story."

He nodded, as if I'd said something deeply profound. "Indeed they are, but you seem to be a heroine whose messes seem to not be an element of your plot but rather of your own making." He took another bite. "Keep eating that apple and maybe you'll see sense before you do something completely foolish."

I threw my apple half at him. It bounced off his chest rather satisfyingly. "You keep changing roles in my story. Why do you keep switching back and forth between friend and foe?"

He glanced disappointedly at my fallen apple before meeting my gaze again, his own intense. "*I* don't change roles; *you* keep changing the part you want me to play. I keep hoping one day you'll select the one I desperately want to be for you."

That strange energy passed between us again. Despite my annoyance I found myself stepping closer, drawn towards *him*. "And what role is that?" I whispered.

"I think you know." He lightly traced around my eyes. "Sometimes one keeps secrets even from themselves."

"And you're convinced you know whatever secret I'm keeping?"

"I'm quite invested in your story, Rosalina." He bridged the remaining distance and shoved the rest of his apple half in my hands. I shuddered as our fingers touched. "The spell on my apple is working, so perhaps if you eat this you'll find out."

He withdrew and walked towards Duncan, leaving me staring after him cradling his apple to my chest. I took a tentative bite and a myriad of foreign emotions immediately swirled through me, ones I had no name for, but ones that were warm, tender, and beautiful. They seemed to intensify when Alastar paused to glance over his shoulder and our gazes met once more.

With a gasp I allowed his apple to slip through my fingers to the forest floor, but the emotions remained as I stared longingly at the guard whose own story I was suddenly eager to continue.