

The original scene where Aiden tries to persuade his father to allow him to marry Eileen. It was far too easy of an obstacle to overcome, so it was rewritten and expanded. It can be found in the updated version of my book.

~Deleted Scene: Confrontation with the King~
(Original Scene)

My heart pounded as I stared at the surrounding soldiers, encircling us like a noose with their sharp swords. I pressed myself closer to Aiden, his warmth the only thing keeping my escalating panic from completely overcoming me. Why hadn't the Forest protected us? I suppose even its love for us couldn't override its allegiance to the king.

"Lower your swords." Aiden's words were clipped and full of authority.

The soldiers obeyed him, lowering their weapons but not sheathing them. I blinked, surprised at the ease with which Aiden had been obeyed.

"What's the meaning of this, General Duncan?" Aiden demanded, his expression hardened.

A dark-haired soldier stepped forward and bowed. "Forgive us, Your Highness, but we're under orders from His Majesty."

"*Your Highness!?*" Shock pierced my suffocating fear. The soldiers and swords faded from my awareness as this emotion eclipsed me. I could only focus on Aiden. I gaped at him in utter disbelief, searching his black eyes. He couldn't be...he was just a nobleman. He would have told me...*why* hadn't he told me? "You're a prince? Of which kingdom?"

Aiden's face twisted with guilt as he met my gaze. "I'm so sorry," he whispered, his hold tightening around my hand. "I tried to tell you so many times."

His attention snapped back to the soldiers, a problem more pressing than the shock and confusion raging within me at this revelation that Aiden was a prince.

"I order you not to touch Eileen," Aiden said.

"Apologies, Your Highness, but His Majesty's command overrules even yours."

Aiden scooted farther in front of me, placing himself as a protective shield between General Duncan and me. "I don't care. I refuse to stand aside and let you take her."

General Duncan's stance didn't falter as he took in Aiden's defense and our intertwined hands. "I'm sorry, Your Highness, but I'm under orders to bring her before His Majesty."

The regality cloaking Aiden melted away as he crumpled, his eyes full of so many apologies when he turned and cupped my face, pressing his forehead against mine. "Eileen."

My whimper escaped as I pressed myself closer, needing to feel the security and assurance that only came from him. "What's going to happen to me?" I stuttered.

Aiden pulled me aside to give us a small bit of privacy. "Nothing, darling. Everything will be alright. Trust me."

Despite the promise of his words, fear filled his voice. His gaze caressed my face, as if committing my features to memory in case this was the last time we saw one another.

I clung to him more tightly, desperate for him to remain with me. I'd fought too long and hard for him, for us, only to lose him now. How ironic that the Forest that had brought us together would now become the place where we were torn apart.

"Don't leave me," I pleaded.

"I'm so sorry, I have no choice. I need to go ahead and explain everything, but first there's something I need to tell you." His gaze penetrated mine. "I'm not just a prince; I'm the Dark Prince Deidric."

My breath hitched at this second startling revelation. "What?" But his name was *Aiden*, not Deidric.

"I should have told you before now; I tried to before but it just never seemed to be the right time. This wasn't how I wanted to do it." He ran his fingers through my hair. "I promise to explain everything, but first I need to talk to my father. I'm so sorry for the mess I've entangled you in, but I promise I'll get you out of it."

There were so many questions I had, but now wasn't the time. I stroked his face and he melted against my touch, relieved at my acceptance.

He leaned down to kiss me but hesitated, as if afraid that my learning his true identity would change everything between us. And perhaps it would have if the old Eileen had discovered the truth. But I was not that Eileen anymore. I no longer feared falling in love, but of losing it—of losing him.

I stood on tiptoe to meet his kiss. Light, soft, and full of tenderness. I kissed not the Dark Prince but Aiden, the man I'd fallen in love with, and in that kiss I realized I trusted him completely. No matter what happened, we'd always remain together.

Aiden stared longingly at me after we broke apart before he turned to the surrounding soldiers. The hardness I used to fear filled Aiden's expression as his regality returned.

His sharp glare took in every soldier. "No harm is to befall Eileen. She is your future queen and will be treated with respect. Do I make myself clear?"

Future queen? Me? The panic filling my chest escalated.

General Duncan bowed. "Understood, Your Highness. Our instructions were only to bring her to the king. Rest assured no harm will come to her. You have my word."

Aiden stroked my cheek with his thumb before reluctantly releasing me and stepping back, pain filling his eyes as if he'd just severed himself from his heart.

I scrambled for his hand, the panic his presence had managed to quell rising again as he pulled away. "Don't leave me."

He gave my hand a reassuring squeeze. "It'll be alright. I'll go ahead to explain everything to my father. I promise to protect you."

I searched his dark eyes and slowly managed to loosen my vise-like grip. "I trust you."

He turned to Duncan. "Remember my orders. You're not to touch her." He kissed my cheek before he disappeared down a path that had opened up, a shortcut that the Forest immediately sealed off behind him.

The fear clenching my heart tightened as General Duncan and his accompanying soldiers, swords now sheathed, escorted me down another trail that twisted towards the palace I'd just escaped from.

With each step, I struggled to process all I'd learned about Aiden's true identity. This entire time, he'd been the Dark Prince Deidric? All the unexplained riddles fell into place—why Aiden had enrolled me in the competition for Prince Deidric's hand, why Aiden had never been present at court during the tasks, why Aiden had been assisting me so I would win...these thoughts and more swirled through my mind as we entered the palace.

Inside, the marble hallways were abandoned except for an occasional footman. Murmurs and music drifted from the ballroom down the corridor where the final task

was taking place. I ached to escape back to the Forest or even to the ball—anywhere rather than confronting the formidable king.

The sound of laughter and music faded as General Duncan led me down an opposite hallway. My pulse palpitated with each step and skittered to a stop when he paused outside a guarded door.

“General Duncan to see His Majesty,” he informed the guards. One opened the door enough for him to slip through. I wiped my sweaty palms on my gown as we waited. After a tense moment—during which my nerves flared to life all over again—he returned.

“His Majesty will see you.”

General Duncan escorted me into the vast, gilded throne room. Inside, the stern king sat on a gold-and-jewel-encrusted throne, surrounded by guards and his closest advisors, all watching me with sharp intensity. Princess Seren stood beside him, smirking, while on his other side...sweet relief washed over me to see my Aiden. Worry twisted his expression, but his eyes were adoring as always. He strode towards me and wrapped me in the security of his tender embrace.

“Eileen,” he murmured, pulling me close. I clutched his uniform as I burrowed against him. His breath caressed my skin as he leaned down to my ear. “Don’t worry, I’m explaining everything to Father.”

I peeked out. One glimpse of the king’s hardened countenance revealed that Aiden’s explanation wasn’t going well. Aiden wound his arm around my waist and turned us to face the king.

“Your Majesty, may I present Princess Eileen, my chosen bride.”

I shakily curtsied.

The king cocked an eyebrow. “Princess *Eileen*? Not Princess Gemma of Malvagaria? It appears there’s been some deception going on.” He gave Aiden an accusing look. “She’s not even a princess, is she? I’ve suspected something amiss about her. It appears my instincts were correct.”

I remained silent. My chest tightened; each hitching breath became a struggle.

The king’s frown deepened as he surveyed us. “So it’s true? You’re nothing more than a peasant?”

I swallowed and struggled to force words past my parched throat. "Yes, Your Majesty, but I swear it was never my intention..." I trailed off, fear silencing me. Aiden jumped in.

"As I've been explaining, Father, I'm the one who—"

The king's hand snapped up in silent command and Aiden stilled. The king continued to stare at me, the force of his accusing eyes causing my heartbeat to escalate.

"If you're not a princess, then you're obviously a spy sent to infiltrate my kingdom."

I frantically shook my head. "No, Your Majesty." But my protests came out as only a squeak.

"Then how do you explain the presence of a common girl competing for the hand of the crown prince?"

I pressed myself closer to Aiden. He rubbed my back soothingly. "She knew nothing about the competition until she stumbled upon the palace."

The king frowned and shook his head. "Too coincidental."

"You're correct; it's no mere coincidence," Aiden said. "I told the Forest to lead her here so she could compete for my hand."

My head jerked towards him in astonishment. He'd given the Forest such instructions? My heart fluttered at this realization.

"Eileen knew nothing about the competition until after her arrival, when I told the guards and servants she was a princess," Aiden continued. "She didn't even know my true identity. I had to hide it from her because she never wanted to marry a prince. But I love her and want no one but her to be my queen. I'm just hoping she'll still have me now that she knows I'm the crown prince."

The king's expression darkened as he slowly rose, tall and foreboding arrayed in his royal regalia. He took an imposing step closer. "Yes, you're the crown prince, while she's nothing more than a commoner." He slowly raked his gaze over me. Despite my elegant appearance, he sneered in disgust. "Dressing her up can't change her inferiority. She'll never do."

I stiffened and Aiden's hold tightened. "But she passed all your tests," he protested.

"She barely scraped by, undoubtedly due to your efforts, making her unqualified to rule. I only agreed to allow you to break your engagement if you found someone just as eligible as Princess Rheanna to marry." He glared at me and I withered beneath it. "You agreed to choose a *true* princess, which this girl clearly is not."

"She's just as eligible as the other candidates," Aiden said. "If the terms of our agreement were that my chosen bride were of noble or royal birth, then you'd be correct, but instead you merely dictated I marry someone shown to be eligible within the confines of the contest *you* designed, something her participation in the contest has proven. There's no law forbidding the crown prince from marrying a commoner."

The king's jaw tightened. "Maybe not, but there's *tradition*, and it's a tradition that we'll maintain, especially when your choice is a peasant." He advanced another step further, eyes flashing, like a tiger on the prowl who meant to devour me. My blood chilled. "You tell me you're not a spy and you don't want to be a princess. What other possible motivation do you have to infiltrate the palace at the risk of your life should you be caught?"

I looked up at Aiden. "I love him."

The king snorted. "What does love have to do with his duties and obligations as the crown prince? His responsibility is to find a suitable wife to be Queen of Sortileya. And you, as a commoner, are not suited."

I clutched Aiden's hand more tightly. "Your Majesty, I swear, I never wanted to be a princess; I only wanted Aiden." The thought of being queen caused my stomach to churn.

"You cannot have him," the king said. "I'll hear no more of this. Deidric, you'll proceed to the ball at once and choose your wife from among the many eligible women in attendance."

"Father, you can't force me into an unwanted marriage," Aiden said. "If I'm not allowed to marry Eileen, then I'll not marry at all. Your royal line will die with me, and the throne will pass to Oscar."

The king's eye twitched. "My inept nephew will bring the kingdom to ruin."

"Furthermore," Aiden continued, "having a queen with Eileen's common background will not only provide the monarchy with a unique and invaluable perspective on how to better rule our people, but it will also appease our subjects. Her natural compassion will make her a benevolent and beloved ruler."

The king frowned, considering. "There has been some restlessness amongst some of the poorer villages...perhaps your marriage to her will help defuse the situation." For an entire minute, the two stared one another down before the king softened at Aiden's pleading expression. "You love her?"

"More than anything," Aiden said fiercely.

The king nodded. "Very well." He straightened back into his regal posture. "I refuse to allow my royal line to die or my kingdom to suffer from an inept rule. You've left me no choice. Against my better judgement, for the good of the kingdom, I grant my permission for you to marry this commoner."

My heart lifted and Aiden's arm around me tightened with his own relief as his face broke into a boyish grin. "Thank you, Father."

A timid knock at the door announced the arrival of a footman. "Forgive the interruption, Your Majesty, but many of the guests are questioning your absence, as well as the absence of the crown prince."

The king sighed. "Undoubtedly, rumors are already spreading as to why my son hasn't yet shown up to fulfill his duty for the final task."

"I couldn't say, Your Majesty," the servant stuttered.

"Inform our guests that we'll be there shortly." The king waved him out. The footman departed with a bow, and Aiden glanced back at the king.

"There's no more purpose for this ball; I've already chosen my bride."

"Regardless of your choice, you'll fulfill your duty as crown prince and see this competition through till the end."

Aiden bowed. "I understand. Thank you, Your Majesty."

Muttering darkly to himself, the king strode from the room, followed closely by his entourage of advisors and guards, leaving behind Princess Seren, whose initial gleeful smirk had twisted into a glower. Aiden's hardened persona returned as he glared at his sister.

"You've gone too far this time, Seren," he said. "I warned you not to interfere, especially when you know I've been your only ally against the arranged betrothal you detest so much."

I rested my hand on his arm, a warning not to allow his dark persona to overcome him. He took a deep, calming breath before turning back to his sister.

"Treat Eileen with respect; otherwise I'd suggest you prepare for your voyage."

Princess Seren's haughty disdain melted away and her face paled. Without another word, Aiden escorted me from the room. I followed in a daze. My head was spinning with all that had transpired. Aiden was the Dark Prince. His father, the king, was allowing us to be married. All the fears and worries of the past week melted away. Despite my fears of being caught coming to pass, I'd somehow escaped the consequences. Aiden had protected me, just as he'd promised.

I knew that it would only be one of many promises he'd keep throughout our life together, and our path—despite the obstacles we'd faced since we'd first met—now lay open before us.