

This scene takes place during Aiden and Eileen's visit to Draceria. Although the scene was cut, portions made it into the final manuscript.

~Deleted Scene: Suspicions Concerning Drake~

It was impossible to follow the polite conversations around me as I sat in the parlor following my conversation with Dedric and Eileen, not when I was still whirling from my recent discovery—Drake was really *Prince Drake of Malvagaría*.

While I had no proof that he and the missing prince were one and the same, my heart confirmed the truth I didn't want to acknowledge...as did the resemblances I began to notice between Drake and Briar and the Queen of Malvagaría as I began to look for them—all three had the same dark brown eyes, the same black hair, and similar facial structure—particularly the strong jaw Drake and Briar shared.

I paid a lot of attention to Briar, analyzing each of his movements, for if Drake and his sisters were cursed, Briar surely was too. But I couldn't glean any more clues as to what it could possibly be, for other than the way he frequently touched the rose he wore, nothing about his behavior was out of place, although he did look quite exhausted.

He caught my watching him and managed a small smile before leaning towards me. "I regret I haven't had a chance to spend more time with you this evening. Are you doing well?"

I almost startled at his attention before nodding. "I had a good visit with Dedric and Eileen."

"I'm glad. I hope you and I have a chance to visit tomorrow." And although he pulled away after this comment, I could tell he meant it. Hope swelled in my heart as I turned away and found Elodie monitoring the exchange with a sly grin.

She leaned over Aveline, who sat beside me on the settee, and wriggled her eyebrows. "Things seem to be going well between you two lovebirds."

My cheeks warmed. "Things are definitely going better."

"I should say—he's scarcely kept his eyes off you the entire evening." She clasped her hands with a contented sigh. "He's smitten, I just know it."

That seemed unlikely. Elodie clearly saw the doubt in my expression and sighed.

"Why are you afraid of the possibility that someone genuinely likes you?"

I startled. I wasn't afraid of such a thing...was I? After all, I *wanted* Briar to like me. I just didn't see any reason why he should. But Elodie was right about one thing—he was paying me more attention lately., whether out of friendship or because his interest was deepening, I wasn't sure Still, it had to be a good sign, right?

I glanced sideways at Briar again. His weariness was more pronounced as the hour grew later, not to mention he seemed to be touching his rose more and more frequently.

I scooted closer. "You look tired," I whispered.

"I'm quite exhausted." Even as he spoke, he stifled a yawn. "I'm afraid that because of that, as usual I'm not good company, but if you want to converse, I'll do my best to be at least passably engaging."

"I did want to inquire about..."

I bit my lip, hesitating. Did I dare ask him? He turned his dark eyes to me. Now that I knew the two were brothers, it seemed so obvious he and Drake had the same eyes. How could I not have seen it before?

Briar prodded me with these eyes to continue my thought. I took a wavering breath. "How is your brother Drake? And your sisters, Gemma and Reve?"

Briar visibly stiffened. "They're all well."

"I'm glad to hear it. There are whispers that poor Gemma is trapped in a tower, so if she's well, I'm certain that's merely a story."

I held my breath and waited to see how Briar would respond. He frowned. "Let me rephrase my answer: last I heard, all my siblings were well, but I admittedly haven't seen them recently to discern their wellbeing."

"So is Gemma really trapped—"

"I didn't think you were one for rumors, Rheanna." He didn't say it rudely, but I felt snubbed nonetheless. I felt prickled for a moment before I determinedly pushed on.

"But what of Drake? Deidric told me he's been missing for several years. Do you know where he is?"

For a long moment Briar stared at me, his expression unreadable. Finally, the corner of his lip quirked up. "Perhaps I should be asking you for Drake's wellbeing, considering you likely know more about it than I do." His normally stoic expression became almost challenging before he looked away, ending our conversation.

I straightened. Well, as cryptic as that conversation had been, it had confirmed what I'd been suspecting concerning Drake's true identity...while also creating a new worry—Briar clearly knew I possessed Drake's mirror. Did this upset him?

I chewed on my lower lip as I searched his expression. As usual, his face betrayed no emotion, least of all resentment. I wasn't sure which bothered me more—Briar's indifference I clearly had some sort of relationship with his brother or that he knew of Drake's curse and was doing little about it. Both were rather unpleasant thoughts.

Deidric and Eileen were the first to rise and bid everyone goodnight. As they left, they caught my gaze with a look like they hoped to speak with me. I gratefully seized the opportunity to leave.

"May I escort you, Rheanna?" Briar asked in his usual monotone as I stood.

"No, thank you." I hurried from the parlor, where Deidric and Eileen were waiting for me in the hallway. Deidric didn't waste any time.

"May we visit Liam? I cannot leave unless I see his condition for myself." Worry filled his eyes.

"He's likely resting, so you wouldn't be able to talk with him."

"Please, Rheanna."

I had no doubt Liam would want to visit with his best friend, and I couldn't resist giving my favorite sibling anything he wanted at the best of times, let alone when he was dying. "You won't be able to stay for very long—he's growing weaker every passing day—but I know he'll want to see you."

I led him and Eileen through the corridors, lined with flickering lanterns that cast ominous shadows over us as we walked, an dreary atmosphere that fit our silent, solemn mood.

Halfway to Liam's quarters, Deidric spoke. "Are you feeling better after our conversation, Rheanna?"

Whatever resentment towards him that might have lingered faded at the genuine concern filling his and Eileen's expressions. Why had I insisted harboring a grudge towards him for so long? I wanted nothing more than to put our past behind me. I never would have thought it possible before, but now that we were free from both the awkwardness that had come from our unwanted arrangement and my own wounded feelings I'd determinedly clung to after it'd broke up, a friendship with Deidric finally seemed possible.

"I'm feeling much better, thank you." I hesitated. "And please call me Rhea. For we're friends now, aren't we?"

"We are. As such, please call me Aiden. I hate the name Deidric." His nose wrinkled.

"Of course you don't," Eileen said. "Else you wouldn't have let me have my way in naming our son after you."

"Dedric suits him, whereas it doesn't suit me at all."

"Did you bring your son?" I asked. "I'd love to meet him."

Eileen lit up. "We did. You can visit him in the nursery tomorrow."

I smiled at the prospect of meeting Deidric's—no, *Aiden's*—son, relieved he wasn't *our* son like was the original plan. By the uncomfortable look on Aiden's face, he seemed to be thinking something similar. Our eyes met and we both laughed, which melted away the last of the tension that had previously festered between us.

All humor faded when we reached Liam's guarded door. I knocked and a moment later Anwen emerged, her expression haggard. "How is he?" I asked her, even though I could tell by her face that he wasn't doing well at all.

She sighed wearily. "The same." She managed a hint of a smile. "He sat up for a few minutes and we were able to talk for a little while, but otherwise he's slept for most of the day, although he's awake now. When you knocked, he almost had his usual energy, for he was quite insistent I not answer the door. He said he wanted me all to himself."

"That sounds like Liam. He adores you, Anwen."

Her expression softened, although tears glistened in her eyes. "What will I do if he doesn't get better?"

I pulled her into a hug, which she returned briefly before forcing herself to straighten and turn a brave face towards Aiden and Eileen.

"Are you here to see Liam?"

They gaped at her and I remembered that the last time they'd seen her, they'd believed her to be Princess Lavena, unaware that in reality she was an imposter.

Eileen stirred first. "If he's up for a visit, we'd love to see him."

"He'll welcome your company," Anwen said. "But please don't stay long; he needs his rest."

Aiden and Eileen entered the room, leaving Anwen staring at the closed door with a look like she was anxious to return to Liam's side. I wrapped my arm around her for a side hug and she slumped against me.

"What will I do if he dies?" She burrowed her face in my shoulder and released her tears. "I can't lose him, Rhea. I can't bear the thought of living without him."

She clung to me as if I were her life preserver in a stormy ocean. I stroked her hair, trying to soothe her, but feeling helpless on how to help her. But I was powerless. I couldn't help Liam, I couldn't help Anwen, I couldn't help Drake, and I couldn't help myself.

I held Anwen until Aiden and Eileen emerged only a few minutes later—the horror filling their pale expressions confirming the direness of Liam's condition. "He's asking for you," Aiden told Anwen. She immediately left to go to her husband, shutting the door behind her.

Aiden and Eileen departed and I finally returned to my room, drained from the long evening full of a tumult of revelations and emotions. I paused outside the door with my hand on the knob, hesitating. Drake was waiting for me...*Prince* Drake. I wasn't sure I was ready to face him after learning the startling truth about who he really was.

But I'd have to face him sooner or later. I took a deep breath and pushed the door open. I was immediately greeted by Drake himself. "Finally, Rhea. I thought you'd never return. Please put me out of my misery and tell me how everything went."

My gaze immediately sought and found Drake's mirror where I'd left him at the window, now overlooking the velvety night. For a minute I stared at him, noticing more similarities between him and Briar that I'd been so blind to before.

This is Prince Drake of Malvagaria. He's a real person. Trapped inside a mirror. With no way out of it in the foreseeable future.

I closed the door behind me and slowly settled in the seat beside him. His concerned gaze searched mine. "I've been wondering how it's going with Deidric," he said. "Are you alright? Because if you're not, I swear I'll break out of this mirror and hunt Deidric down." He balled his hands into fists.

Oh yes, the last Drake—*Prince* Drake, I couldn't help but think—had seen me, I'd been on the brink of a meltdown at the thought of seeing Aiden again. It was amazing how much better I felt after only a few hours.

"Oh that? Yes, things went well with Aiden."

While he didn't loosen his fists, Drake's eyebrows rose, and I couldn't help but notice how thick and dark they were, just like Briar's. Their mouths were similar as well, as was their dark brown hair and eyes. Really, how could I have not noticed the resemblances before now?

"Aiden? Who's Aiden?"

"That's Deidric's middle name. He allows his friends to call him that."

His eyebrows rose further. "So you two are friends now?"

"Yes." The thought was so freeing. "We talked. I feel much better."

It was as if the wound Aiden had left on my heart had finally been stitched up. Now that I'd let go of the pain from our broken engagement, I could see it for what it was—not a slight against me, but simply a difficult event in my past, one that had hurt fiercely, but like all wounds, would now fully heal now that I would no longer cut it open. If I could heal from the most traumatic part of my past, could I also heal from other parts of my past, namely how I viewed myself?

Drake was silent, his gaze searching, as if trying to learn whether there was more to the story. "I'm glad," he finally said.

I ached to tell him more—that Aiden and I had not only discussed our past relationship, but that we'd talked about the Malvagarian Royal Family, Drake's family—the suspicions swirling around about the Queen of Malvagarria, as well as the curses of each of the children. Did I dare bring it up?

"Aiden brought up some of the rumors regarding Briar's family," I began. Was it my imagination, or did Drake visibly stiffen?

"Which rumors?"

"That they're all cursed. Do you know anything about that?"

"Everyone knows that the Malvagarian royals are cursed." Drake was avoiding my eyes.

"Yes, but *why*?"

Drake merely shrugged. By the tight set of his jaw, he wouldn't be sharing anything about that. Time for a new approach.

"Is Briar cursed? Because he doesn't *seem* cursed."

Drake was silent a moment. "Not all curses can be seen with the natural eye." He said nothing more.

In the past, I'd dismissed Drake's usual vagueness without a second thought, but now I saw it for what it was—he's *protecting his brother*. Yet his answer had been specific enough to confirm one thing.

"So Briar is cursed." And Drake knew exactly what it was. If only he'd share it with me.

He managed a tight smile. "I wouldn't worry about it."

"How can I not? I'm on the brink of an engagement with the man." And when I married Briar, Drake would become my brother-in-law. My stomach knotted. The thought was rather...horrifying.

He couldn't become my *brother*. I didn't want that relationship with him, I wanted... but I couldn't put what I wanted most into words. Instead, I began to subconsciously stroke the rim of the mirror. Drake stirred and glanced towards my hand.

I paused. "Can you feel that?"

"I think so. It feels...nice."

I relaxed and resumed stroking. Drake relaxed against the mirror frame, as if he were leaning against my hand. *What would it feel like if I could really touch him?* Would I ever discover the answer to that? The truth squeezed my heart. Even if I broke the curse, freeing Drake wouldn't allow me to be with him.

But I still needed to free him. For him...and for me. "Do you have any more ideas on how to break your curse?" I asked, for the mystery behind Drake's curse gnawed at me more than ever.

He stiffened. "My curse?" he whispered.

"Yes. Perhaps if you told me what you knew about the curses of the Malvagarian royals, I could see if perhaps there's a connection to yours. Then we could go to the library and—"

"Rhea, please don't." He looked almost panicked.

I frowned at him. "Don't what?"

"I—I don't think you should break the curse."

I gaped at him, flabbergasted. "But why? Don't you want me to?" But it was more than what he wanted, but what *I* wanted. I'd become too involved with him to turn back now.

He seemed at a loss for what to say. "Rhea, you sweet girl, I appreciate your help so much. But I'm afraid if you help me, you'll get hurt. Nothing is worth that."

While my heart lifted at his words and the foreign emotion filling my breast only intensified, my wariness returned. There was something more with this curse than Drake was telling me. Did it have to do with the curse itself, or the fact that Drake was a Malvagarian prince? I was tired of all the mysteries and ached to confront him, but I was almost afraid that whatever he had to say might cause the trust I'd built with him to shatter. And it wouldn't just be my trust he'd break.

Are you strong enough for another broken heart, Rhea?

The answer was clear: I couldn't lose him. So for now I'd allow him to keep his secrets, but I wouldn't allow him to forbid me from helping him. My heart constricted at the thought of Drake remaining trapped forever. I would find a way to free him—even when I was terrified what would happen between us once I did.