

The rewritten and expanded scene as found in the updated version of my book, where Aiden tries to persuade his father to allow him to marry Eileen.

~Revised Scene: Confrontation with the King~

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 fierce.

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 shock eclipsed me. I gaped at Aiden in utter disbelief. 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 slowly he met my gaze. "I'm so sorry," he whispered, his hold tightening around my hand. "This was the secret I wrongly kept from you. Believe me when I say that I wanted 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.

"You're not to touch Eileen," Aiden said. "That's an order."

"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 in defeat, his eyes full of so many apologies when he turned and cupped my face to press his forehead against mine. "Eileen."

My whimper escaped as I nestled 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 Crown Prince of Sortileya, 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...I could never find the right words to—this wasn't how I wanted to do it." He ran his fingers through my hair, his touch soothing. "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 swear I'll get you out of it."

I wanted to be angry for his secrets, but I now trusted him enough to believe there must have been a reason for them. I had many questions, but now wasn't the time. I stroked his face and he leaned against my touch, clearly relieved at my acceptance and forgiveness.

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—one 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.

Fear clenched my heart as General Duncan and his accompanying soldiers, swords now sheathed, escorted me down a trail that twisted towards the palace I'd just escaped from. My shock pressed against me with each step as I struggled to process 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 he had been assisting me so I would win...

I was still tempted to be resentful of his actions, but I wouldn't make the mistake of allowing my pain and bitterness to think the worst of him...like I'd done with Father

for all these years. As I thought over all our interactions, I realized that while he'd withheld his true identity from me, he hadn't actually lied. Because I now trusted him, I could trust that he'd had a reason to do so.

We entered the palace. Except for an occasional footman, the marble hallways were abandoned. 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 being forced to confront 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 guided me not to the throne room but to a gloomy stone stairwell. I'd only descended a few steps when I realized where this twisting stairway led.

My breath hitched and I froze, thawing only enough to turn to General Duncan with wide eyes. "Where are you taking me?" I could barely speak through the fear clogging my throat.

Regret filled his rigid expression. "Forgive me, but His Majesty has ordered you to be taken to the dungeon."

"But you told Aiden you were to bring me to the king," I stuttered.

General Duncan lowered his eyes. "His Majesty knew His Highness would fight us on the issue if he knew where we'd been ordered to take you."

I ached to protest, but terror had stolen my voice. His hand pressed against my back, urging me to continue, but my limbs were frozen. He urged me more forcefully, compelling me to shakily move.

I trembled with each step I ventured into the dank darkness, the only light coming from the flickering sconces lining the walls. Cold seeped over me the further we descended, magnifying the icy terror tightening my chest. This was a realization of my worst fear ever since becoming entangled in Aiden's Princess Competition, and I was powerless to stop it.

The pungent odor of decay overwhelmed my senses as we stepped deep inside the dungeon. General Duncan fumbled with some keys before opening a cell with an ominous creak. He motioned for me to step inside, but I didn't move.

No. I refused to be forced into a cell like a common criminal. My entire life I'd allowed outside influences to guide my choices—whether it was my own insecurities

that had led me to believe my father had abandoned me, taking whatever path the Forest chose for me, or my own inability to escape the Princess Competition.

It was time to take control. Though the dozen surrounding guards made escape impossible, I did have several weapons at my disposal.

I turned to General Duncan. "His Majesty may have given orders for me to be sent to the dungeon, but His Highness Crown Prince Deidric gave no such command and instead ordered you to treat me with respect."

"Forgive me, but the king's orders trump the crown prince's." He appeared truly regretful.

I bit my lip. I knew enough about royal law to know he was unfortunately correct. I struggled to think through the panic scrambling my thoughts. My mind drifted back to the night Aiden had tutored me in royal knowledge. We'd spent a good portion of our time going over laws and royal protocol in a variety of situations...including in regards to those accused of a crime.

I took a steadying breath. *A true princess is confident.* I drew myself up and met General Duncan's gaze evenly.

"That may be true, but I'm here as a princess representing the royal family of Malvagarria, and I expect to be treated with dignity and respect. Regardless of whether or not you believe I'm an imposter, according to the law established by King Fergus II, my royal status grants me the right to face my accuser and address his charge myself. You will take me to His Majesty immediately and allow me to plead my case." I lifted my chin in the regal manner Aiden had taught me, daring him to disobey me.

General Duncan studied me for a moment, his expression stoic but his eyes shining with clear approval. He bowed. "Certainly, Your Highness. It will be my pleasure."

I quickly masked my astonishment at having him concede so easily before I followed General Duncan back up the winding steps, the light growing brighter with each turn on the staircase.

General Duncan didn't speak until we'd reached the landing. "If I might be so bold as to say, I believe Prince Deidric has chosen well for himself."

My heart danced in excitement, but I simply nodded in acknowledgement. He didn't speak again as he and his soldiers escorted me down several corridors, whose

elegance and brightness were a welcome reprieve after my brief sojourn in the dank stone dungeon. He paused outside a guarded door.

"General Duncan to see His Majesty," he informed the guards. One of them opened the door wide enough for us to enter.

I stepped into the vast, gilded throne room. Inside, the stern king sat on a gold throne encrusted with jewels, surrounded by guards and his closest advisors, all watching me with sharp intensity. Princess Seren stood beside him with a cold smirk, while on his other side...

Sweet relief washed over me to see my Aiden. Worry twisted his expression, but his eyes were adoring. He reached me in only a few strides and wrapped me in the security of his tender embrace.

"Eileen," he murmured, holding me close. I clutched his uniform as I burrowed against him. 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. His mustache quivered as he glared first at me, then at General Duncan.

"What is the meaning of this? I gave explicit orders for the imposter to be taken to the dungeon."

Alarm filled Aiden's expression. Without releasing me, he turned his hard fury towards his father. "You ordered her to be taken to the *dungeon*?"

The king nodded without any sign of regret or apology. "I certainly did. As you can see, my orders weren't carried out. Explain, General Duncan."

He stepped forward and bowed. "I initially obeyed you, Your Majesty, until the princess reminded me that royal law grants her the right to come before you to plead her case."

The king pursed his lips and didn't respond. Aiden took the opportunity to wind his arm around my waist and turn us to face his father. "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? There's clearly been some deception going on and I won't stand for it." 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 and my decision to send this imposter to the dungeon was warranted.”

My chest tightened, making each hitching breath a struggle.

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

I swallowed and struggled to force words past my parched throat. “Yes, Your Majesty, but I swear it was never my intention...” The confidence I’d exhibited in the dungeon seemed to have disappeared. I trailed off, fear silencing me.

Aiden hastily interjected. “As I’ve been explaining, Father, I’m the one who—”

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

One of the accompanying advisors was the first to break the tense silence. “Your Majesty, if I may...”

The king lazily waved his hand in permission for his advisor to continue.

“The Princess Competition was meant to bring together all the eligible princesses and noblewomen from the surrounding kingdoms in order to form an advantageous political alliance. To have His Royal Highness choose a peasant as his bride is unacceptable.”

Another advisor stepped forward. “I must agree. It would harm our relations with Draceria when they learn that Prince Deidric rejected Princess Rheanna in favor of one so common. Besides, how can we be certain we can trust her? She could be a spy sent to infiltrate our kingdom.”

I frantically shook my head. “That’s not true, Your Majesty.” But my protests came out as only a squeak.

The king raised his eyebrow in challenge. “Then how do you explain the presence of a village girl competing for the hand of the crown prince? And how did you even gain access to the palace? You must have had an accomplice.”

I pressed myself closer to Aiden. His hand soothingly ran over my back. “She’s innocent of these charges. She knew nothing about the competition until she stumbled upon the palace.”

The king 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. We had met before.”

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 Princess Gemma," Aiden continued. "She didn't even know my true identity. I kept it hidden from her due to her reluctance 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 around my waist 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. You agreed to choose a *true* princess, which this girl clearly is not."

I trembled under his piercing glare.

"She's just as eligible as the other candidates," Aiden protested. "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 has proven. There's no law forbidding the crown prince from marrying a commoner."

The king's jaw tightened. "Perhaps not, but there's *tradition* to marry within your own station, and it's a tradition that we'll maintain." His eyes flashed as he advanced another step. "Who exactly are you? 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?"

My gaze met Aiden's. "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."

The advisors all nodded in agreement.

My hold around Aiden's hand tightened. "Your Majesty, I swear I never wanted to be a princess; I only want Aiden." The thought of being queen churned my stomach.

"You cannot have him," the king said. "I'll hear no more of this. You will leave the palace immediately and return to your village." His hardened gaze snapped to Aiden. "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. I agreed to the engagement to Rheanna in order to please you and for the benefit of our kingdom, but now that I've found love I cannot settle for a mere political alliance." Aiden lifted his chin defiantly. "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 advisors sputtered in protest. "Your Majesty, we can't allow that to happen. He'd ruin Sortileya within the year."

The king's mustache twitched. "My inept nephew cannot be trusted with such a responsibility. But do you honestly believe your peasant will handle it any better?"

With a wavering breath I released Aiden's hand and stepped forward. "Your Majesty, I never aspired to be queen, and I don't claim that I will be a perfect one. I merely chose Aiden, and while that path put me on a path not of my choosing, I'll gladly walk it as long as he's by my side. But I assure you that I will do my best to live up to the title that will come from being with him."

The king's attention remained fixed on me. I lifted my chin and continued.

"I believe a queen with my common background will provide the monarchy with a unique and invaluable perspective on how to better rule Sortileya. During my time at the palace, I've come to learn that despite my initial doubts, I have it within me to become a queen. In this competition you've tested for poise and knowledge, but are there not greater qualities for a ruler to possess, such as compassion and love for the people? I will care for your subjects because I'm one of them, and will therefore bring a benevolence to the position that a foreign princess wouldn't."

The king's eyebrows rose in clear surprise. "You're a common girl and yet you speak with a bearing that could almost pass for a true princess. How is that possible?"

"She may be of common birth," Aiden said, "but I have no doubt she'll rise to her position and serve our people well. Her natural compassion will make her a beloved ruler."

The king's brow furrowed as he considered for a moment before adamantly shaking his head. "No, that doesn't matter. You must marry a princess in order to secure a political alliance. If Princess Rheanna was not to your liking, there are others."

"Father, I'm afraid I must stand my ground on this." Aiden hastily continued as the king's face grew a rich shade of purple. "Please consider that there are other advantages to Eileen becoming our future queen. I have hopes that our marriage will help defuse the restlessness that has begun to break out amongst some of the poorer villages. Not to mention I will make a better monarch with her by my side."

The king's angry expression lessened slightly and he glanced at me with a sharp, speculative look. He glanced at the advisor standing directly at his elbow, clearly seeking his opinion.

The advisor harrumphed and began to pace back and forth. "The poorer villages...yes...possibly...their restlessness might calm down...but we should not have to bend so far as to break with honored tradition."

The king nodded sagely. "I agree. Tradition must be upheld at all costs."

"I believe it's some of our honored traditions that have been part of the problem," Aiden said. "Eileen can help us reach out to them and gain their trust. She has a natural grace and bearing that befits a queen, yet she is comfortable and at ease with the villagers."

A myriad of expressions ran over the king's features. He glared at me for a while longer. "She has a long way to go to be a suitable queen."

"But she has already proven how much she can learn in a short span of time, making her an even worthier candidate."

"That's only because she's addled your mind, Son."

"No, she's made me a better man." Aiden ascended the steps dividing him from his father, gently taking me with him. When he reached the king, he lowered his voice. "Please, Father. Let me marry her. I've spent too many years caught up in darkness. She's helped me experience light and happiness again. Surely you can see that I'm different, and it's all because of Eileen."

The king's unyielding expression faltered as he gazed at Aiden. "You do seem different." He paused, considering. "You truly love her?"

"More than anything," Aiden said fiercely.

A flicker of pain crossed the king's expression. "The way she looks at you...it reminds me of the way your dear mother looked at me." His hardened manner softened, and I wondered how much he had suffered with the queen's death. "I thought a political arrangement would help spare you the pain that can come from loving your wife."

The heartbreak filling the king's expression gave me the bravery to speak up. "My mother taught me that the beauty and joy that comes from love is worth any risk or pain."

The king considered for a long moment before he nodded and returned to his throne. "Very well then." He straightened back into his regal posture. "For the good of the kingdom, and for your own happiness, I grant my permission for you to marry...this commoner."

"But Your Majesty—" one of the advisors protested.

The king lifted his hand, immediately silencing him. "The decision has been made."

My heart lifted and Aiden's arm around me tightened with his own relief. 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. "Very well, Your Majesty."

The king muttered darkly to himself as he 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 the respect she deserves; otherwise I 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 spinning with all that had transpired. Aiden was the Dark Prince. His father, the king, was begrudgingly allowing us to be married. All the 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, and I'd stood up for myself with a confidence I didn't know I had.

I now knew that whatever obstacles we faced in our life together, they could be overcome as long as we walked our path together.