

Drake Lets Slip He Knows Prince Briar:

Suspicion crept over me. "How do you know? Are you acquainted with Briar?"

"No," he said a bit too hastily. "Of course I'm not." The guilt in his eyes betrayed him. He was lying to me. Hurt and annoyance flared in my chest.

"Then how do you know we're ill matched?"

"You've spoken enough about him for me to discern his character." Drake avoided my eyes, seeming to find the frame of his mirror fascinating. He definitely knew Briar. The question that remained was: *how?*

"I don't appreciate being lied to, Drake."

He slumped in defeat. "Fine, I do know of Briar...*Prince* Briar, I should say, but only because I'm Malvagarian."

I frowned. From the moment we'd met, I'd never considered he'd been anything but one of my own subjects. After all, he'd been found within the Dracerian palace. "Why didn't you tell me where you're from?" What reason could he possibly have to keep that a secret?

"I didn't think it important."

"Silly me for considering knowing my friend's true nationality important."

He lowered his eyes, his expression remorseful, but I had too many burning questions to be softened so easily.

"If you're from Malvagar, how did you end up in the Dracerian palace?" But I knew the answer before I'd even finished asking my question. "Wait...you didn't show up until *after* our Malvagarian guests arrived. Who brought you?" Had one of their servants brought him in order to plant him in the palace? But why would they do that?

"No one of consequence." Drake shifted nervously, a reaction that caused my heart to pound in trepidation. He was hiding something, which meant something more was likely going on. I'd been a fool to accept Drake so easily. Cursed objects were dangerous; I shouldn't be involved with him.

But it was too late, for Drake had become my friend, one I wanted nothing more than to help, and not just for his sake, but for my own as well. The truth hit me squarely in the chest: *I don't want to lose him.* I just prayed he wouldn't give me cause to no longer trust him, but with the direction this conversation was going, that hope wasn't at all promising.

Drake bit his lip as he warily eyed my expression. "You've figured it out, haven't you? I'm not surprised. You're quite clever."

His sweet words softened some of my annoyance. *Am I clever?* No, I wasn't. *He's just trying to remain in your good graces.* I pressed my hands to my hips. "No flattery."

"I wasn't—"

"Tell me: why were you brought to Draceria?"

He sighed. "No one in Malvagaria was able to break my curse, so I was brought here in hopes that someone here could break it."

"If no one else has managed to break it, do you really think *I* can?"

"Definitely." A fierce look filled Drake's eyes before he suddenly blushed and lowered his gaze once more. "Of course you can."

I wasn't so sure about that, but despite his secrets, I couldn't deny that I still wanted to. "I'll do my best."

The Queen's Threats: (The original scene after Rhea and Drake confront Elodie about her new comb.)

We'd no sooner left the sitting room than footsteps sounded at the end of the corridor. I jumped away from Drake and he dropped my hand as we turned to find Mother and Father approaching.

"We were just looking for you, Rhea," Mother said. "We wanted to talk to you about your betrothal."

Foreboding filled my stomach at their serious expressions. Whatever they had to say, it wouldn't be good news. "What about it?"

Mother sighed. "I'm afraid the queen didn't take your decision well. She—" Her gaze flickered towards Drake and she frowned. "Perhaps we should speak in private."

"Can't he stay?" I wasn't ready to depart from Drake yet, not when he was already being torn away from me.

But Mother was already shaking her head. "We need to speak with you in private."

I didn't move. "What did the queen say?" I asked.

Mother hesitated, but Father stepped forward. "She's extremely displeased with your desires to back out of your engagement at the last minute."

Drake's gaze snapped to mine, full of questions. I could almost hear him ask, *you chose me?*

But while I had chosen him, the decision was feeling more foolhardy in light of remembering the Queen of Malvagaria's determination and the threats that would inevitably follow my refusal to comply to her demands. This morning I'd only been able to

think about the wonder of being in love with a man who loved me in return. Now, I could only focus on the potential consequences of this decision, ones which would undoubtedly be dire.

“Did she make any threats should I back out of the contract?” I asked slowly.

“Nothing directly.” But Father hesitated. “However, she made a passing reminder that Malvagaria’s army is unparalleled, and is far superior to our own.”

Which meant she was threatening war, a war that we’d surely lose. There was no doubt in my mind she’d follow through with her threat. She was making my choosing anything other than the outcome she desired so unappealing she’d force my hand.

Mother, however, seemed unconvinced. “Surely she wasn’t serious about going to war with us over something so trivial.”

Oh, I had no doubt that her comment had been more than an implication. “I believe she’s serious,” I said hollowly.

“But—” Mother wrung her hands, her expression strained with her worry. “She has no real grounds. The contract was never signed.”

“Yes, but it very nearly was,” I said. “I’ve come too far; backing out now would be dishonorable.”

Father rested his hand on my shoulder. “Be that as it may, there is a way out of this. We’ll do what we can to keep our promise to you.”

Despite his words, worry filled both his and Mother’s expressions. I glanced at Drake, whose gaze was pleading. Although I loved him, I now realized that this decision wasn’t just about me and my own wishes; there were other players involved. This choice was also about what was best for my family, my kingdom, and my people.

Could I be so selfish as to choose to live a fairy tale with the man I loved rather than do my duty by marrying a man who’d become a good friend? No, I couldn’t, for I wasn’t that kind of person.

Drake Explains How He Was Cursed: (Takes place before final confrontation with the queen.)

“Never.” His gaze smoldered with his confidence in me, one that only fueled my own.

We began walking again, hurrying through the corridors as quickly as Briar’s slower pace allowed. “Tell me again about when you were cursed; I want to ensure I fully understand it.”

This was the third time he'd be sharing the story, but one couldn't be too cautious; despite my confidence, I was rather nervous; my anxiety tightened my chest with every step closer to confronting the queen I took.

Drake sighed. "Let's see, we were arguing, and then Mother got upset and cast her spell."

"How quick was the spell?" I asked. "Was it instant, or did you have time where you could have moved away if you'd wanted to?"

Drake wrinkled his brow, struggling to remember. "There was enough time that I could have moved away if I'd realized the danger. As it was, I was too shocked to so much as stir until it was too late."

"And you described it as light?"

"Yes, a flash of red light, coming towards me."

"Towards *where*?"

"My chest." He tapped just above his heart.

"And the moment it hit you..."

"I found myself in the hand mirror."

I nodded. So far, his words were only confirming the success of my plan. "Any particular reason why it was *that* specific mirror?"

He frowned thoughtfully. "I think because it was the one I was closest to."

I smiled. He eyed my expression with a half smile of his own.

"Is all this helpful?"

"Very. I'm more confident now—this will work." But despite my belief in myself, I did admittedly have one worry. "What if your mother does another curse?"

"Considering the limits of her magic, whatever curse she does will have a similar effect," Aiden said. "That's why I have no doubt you'll succeed."

We reached the sitting room, where I would continue alone. My fingers had no sooner grazed the knob when Drake's feathery touch caressed my wrist, compelling me to turn to him. Despite the worry still filling his gaze, the tender way he looked at me was with complete faith in me.