

~Aiden's Perspective: The Plan~

The Forest's pathways twisted and turned at my silent command, guiding me home so I could concentrate on the riddle eclipsing my mind. I examined the problem from all angles, desperate to find a solution. The beginnings of a plan lapped at my thoughts, but while I had hopes of it working, the question that still taunted me was *how* to implement it.

Too soon the path wriggled to open up to reveal the palace. Home already? I leaned against a hemlock and took in the grand, marble structure. Home now seemed like a prison, representing not only my royal position but the dutiful engagement contract that held me bound. I'd never given my betrothal any thought until I'd met Eileen, and it hadn't been until today when all I felt for her suddenly became clear.

I recalled the powerful moment during our picnic when I realized my deeper feelings for her. With that life-altering realization everything changed. Contracts of power and wealth common in royal engagements no longer mattered, making my prior arrangement with Rheanna and all the benefits it'd bring meaningless. Father had taught me that choosing a wife I loved came at a cost, a cost which now seemed trivial compared to the horrific thought of losing her.

Her image filled my mind—clear blue eyes; long, silky dark hair; petite build; and her bright smile. I bit back a curse at the strange and not entirely unwelcome fluttering that filled my heart, even as I repeated the question that had haunted me my entire journey back home—how had this happened? By all accounts, Eileen was entirely ordinary, nothing more than another common girl living in my kingdom, one duty dictated I maintain my distance from. But she *wasn't* ordinary. Our friendship had somehow shifted so that there was no one I cared for more than her.

Which made my duty to my throne feel like confining chains.

I love her. The words still sounded foreign even as they felt incredibly right. It was strange how intense the truth of my own feelings were. It was as if they'd been bound behind a prison and were now free to wreck havoc against my heart, reminding me that my union with the woman I loved would be nigh impossible to bring to fruition.

I set my jaw. No. I may be a prince and dear Eileen a commoner, but there was no law forbidding our union...just that blasted engagement contract. I gritted my teeth. How could I marry Princess Rheanna now that I'd found Eileen? I wouldn't. Thus I

wouldn't rest until I'd made Eileen my bride. Father would never agree, of course, but if I could find a way to change his mind...

Epiphany struck.

I entered the palace and strolled purposefully through the halls, ignoring the bows and greetings of the surrounding guards and servants. My faithful guards, Duncan and Alastar, immediately appeared, Duncan maintaining the appropriate guarding distance, whereas Alastar closed the distance until we walked side-by-side.

"How did it go, Prince Aiden?"

I managed a small smile. "It went quite well...only now I find myself in quite the quandary."

"May I ask why?" He maintained his usual stoic expression but his eyes glistened with amusement, as if he already knew my dilemma. I braced myself for an *I told you so* look.

"I've just made the most startling discovery."

He raised his eyebrow, his silent asking for further details.

I took a steadying breath, bracing myself to make my confession out loud. "I'm in love with her."

Alastar's lips twitched, betraying the emotion he fought to keep masked. "That's not startling at all, Your Highness."

I rolled my eyes but my smile didn't falter. "I know you're not surprised; your frequent hints over the past several weeks prove that you're more insightful about my own feelings than I am myself."

"Indeed, Your Highness. I felt obligated to warn you of your deepening feelings considering you so stubbornly denied them for so long."

I now knew why—admitting I loved Eileen would force me to admit I couldn't have her. I frowned at that conundrum. Alastar eyed it with a thoughtful pucker.

"You have yet to inform me what could possibly be *bad* about realizing your charming common girl has stolen your heart."

I slowly released my breath. "Isn't it obvious? I'm engaged to Princess Rheanna." My stomach knotted at the thought of marrying her. How could I have ever been indifferent to the arrangement?

"I see. Hence you're to see His Majesty?"

"Of course." We'd nearly arrived at Father's study. He wouldn't be pleased to be interrupted—which unfortunately wouldn't help my case—but I was too restless and desperate for a way out of my princely duty to care.

I arrived two more corridors later, where I knocked and the attending guards opened the door. I left Alastar and Duncan behind and entered. Father sat at his desk surrounded by books and important documents. Without even looking up, he jabbed his finger at the seat in front of him.

"You rarely interrupt so I know your reasoning for doing so now must be important. Sit, Deidric."

I obeyed and waited restlessly for him to look up. He may have granted me audience, but even I, the crown prince, was required to wait until he felt inclined to humor me with his attention.

Thankfully, today I was only required to wait ten minutes before Father signed his document, pressed his seal below his signature, and finally looked up, pressing his fingers in a steeple. "What is it, Deidric?"

I took a wavering breath and pushed forward. "I request permission to break my engagement contract."

Father's eyes widened. "Excuse me?" Judging by the way his left eyebrow already pulsed, I knew he'd heard my insane request the first time.

"I request permission to break my engagement contract," I repeated. "It occurred to me," I continued hastily before Father could launch into an argument, "that perhaps the contract is no longer as beneficial to us as it was upon its creation."

His eyes narrowed. "Are you suggesting that our careful negotiations I carefully went over with my top advisors are anything else? You know the benefits to our kingdom upon your union with Princess Rheanna. Explain your reasoning for doubting now."

I chose my words carefully in order to best weave my argument. "The engagement was made upon my infancy shortly after you inherited a kingdom from His Majesty King Deidric II that was less than stable. But over the years, our relations have improved and our economy has grown. Thus we no longer *need* an alliance with Draceria."

"That doesn't mean one isn't wise," Father said. "We may be strong enough to stand on our own now, but that doesn't guarantee we won't need the alliance in the future."

I resisted the impulse to bite my lip as I considered; I couldn't show any outward sign of my nerves. "I'm not suggesting we *terminate* the contract, only that we re-examine our candidate for Sortileya's future queen."

I felt a stab of guilt to be questioning Rheanna's suitability. By all accounts, she was beautiful, sweet, and a proper princess, albeit extremely shy. But that didn't change the fact I felt nothing for her and everything for Eileen.

Father frowned thoughtfully as he leaned back in his seat and stroked his beard. "Admittedly, Rheanna has grown into a quiet young woman. That has been an unpleasant surprise." He furrowed his brow thoughtfully as he studied me. "What exactly are you proposing?"

"A contest." I cringed internally at the ridiculousness of the suggestion but Father's eyes glistened.

"Ah, I see. Invite all the princesses and most eligible noblewomen and test them on their royal worth?"

I nodded. "Only by exploring all our options will we ensure that the most capable queen is chosen to rule. Only the best for the Sortileyan throne." Which, in my mind, was only one woman.

He nodded, leaning forward. "Very well, Deidric, I'll accept your suggestion, but only on the condition that I create the terms the future queen will be decided upon."

Drat, I hadn't considered that. I fought to maintain an impassive expression. "I leave the tests in your capable hands and pray you trust my judgement in whom I select to be my bride."

"Choose wisely, Deidric." He returned to his work, signaling the end of our discussion, and I rose to leave.

Outside the study, I released a whooshing breath of relief. I wanted to lean against the door and bask in the success of the first step of the plan I'd haphazardly been putting together ever since my picnic with Eileen, but I was surrounded by guards and servants, meaning I unfortunately had a role to maintain.

I headed outside in order to convey my instructions for step two to the Forest. Alastar easily caught up after I'd only gone a few steps, his eyes brimming with curiosity.

"How did it go, Prince Aiden?"

I grinned. "Father is open to the possibility that perhaps another woman would be a more suitable future queen."

Alastar's eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

"Quite. There shall be a competition."

Alastar's eyebrow rose. "A *competition*?" He made it sound as ridiculous as I considered it myself, but desperation required such an extreme scenario. "Pray tell me, Your Highness, but how will that help you?"

"By asking the Forest to ensure Eileen is led here in order to participate."

Alastar gaped. "But—"

I held up my hand to silence him and he obediently snapped his mouth shut. "If she wins the competition, she'll prove herself eligible according to His Majesty's wishes, which will mean I'll be able to marry her. Now, I must give my instructions to the Forest."

I ignored Alastar's doubtful expression as I stepped outside into the warm late afternoon sunshine, hope swelling in my heart, for I was now one step closer to being with Eileen forever.

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Outside the storm raged. Even without the howling wind and the rain pounding the windowpanes, sleep would still have proved impossible, what with the knowledge that several potential brides slept within the palace walls. Even though I wouldn't be forced to interact with them until my scheme was complete, just the thought of their nearness made me restless.

And I was even more so with the fact that despite my firm instructions to the Forest, Eileen still hadn't arrived. Why did the Forest delay? The competition for my hand began in two days. What would I do if she never came? All would be ruined and I'd be forced to choose another bride. My stomach twisted at that horrific possibility.

I paced the shadowy corridors, trailed by Alastar and his lantern illuminating my path one glowing step at a time. As usual, he didn't seem bothered by my recently acquired habit of wandering the palace at night, which was a relief considering I'd likely be up for awhile.

"Be calm, Prince Aiden; there's still the possibility she'll arrive tomorrow."

"And there's the possibility that she won't." I knotted my fingers through my hair. "The competition begins in two days and she still isn't here. What if she never arrives? What am I getting myself involved in?"

"Dozens of eligible maidens from the surrounding kingdoms competing for your hand, Your Highness."

My throat constricted at the thought. "Hence my question on what idiocy possessed me to come up with such a ridiculous scheme. These upcoming weeks will be torture."

"Although worth the cost if your plan succeeds."

If being the operative word. I paused in my pacing to glance at my friend. "Is this the correct way to get what I want?"

He shrugged. "It's definitely a start."

I gnawed my lip, frantically coming up with an alternative plan should this one fail. "If Eileen fails to arrive, do you think His Majesty would allow me to deem all the candidates unworthy of my hand, leaving me the freedom to choose whomever I want?"

Alastar raised a skeptical brow, his answer. I sighed. Time for another back up plan.

My restless wandering led me to the entrance hall just as a knock penetrated the empty marble chamber. I withdrew into the shadows, Alastar obediently dimming his lantern to hide beside me.

"Who could be arriving so late?" he asked. "It's nearly midnight."

"Indeed." I rested my hand on the hilt of my sword and waited as the footman opened the door. My breath hooked. Even through the darkness and thick rain I recognized the figure standing in the threshold.

Eileen...

I gaped at her, unsure if she was real or a figment of my longings. But no, she was here, just as the Forest had promised in the swaying whispers of its branches.

She was drenched, her dark hair hanging in clumps, her dress clinging to her skin, emphasizing her tempting curves. I swallowed and forced my gaze up in time to witness a shiver raking over her. I stepped forward to approach and wrap my arms around her in order to warm her, but Alastar seized my wrist, jerking me to a stop. Only he would be able to get away with overstepping his bounds in such a way.

"Release me at once," I hissed. "It's *her*."

"Then you'd be wise not to reveal yourself immediately."

I glared at him for his interference before reluctantly seeing the wisdom of his advice. I returned my attention to my Eileen. "I'm relieved to see her. I'd begun to worry the Forest had gotten rebellious."

"The Forest will always obey you."

"It still took too long for it to do so." And did it have to bring Eileen here during a storm? She was soaked. It took all my willpower to avoid rushing to her side and tenderly draping my cloak around her shivering shoulders.

"Please," she stuttered around another violent shiver that wrenched my heart with worry. "I got lost in the woods and was hoping I could—" Her plea ended in a sneeze. The footman scowled, slowly taking in her common attire.

"You're disturbing His Majesty and Their Highnesses because you lost your way?"

I gritted my teeth at his rudeness to Eileen. "Alastar, inform the footman that she's one of the princesses here for the competition."

His usual stoic expression cracked, revealing his alarm. "You want me to tell them *what?* Your Highness, please reconsider. There are no princesses for her to impersonate, and everyone who knows the royal genealogies knows there is no *Princess Eileen* in any of the surrounding kingdoms. If she's to pose as anyone, why not a noblewoman?"

It was unlike Alastar not to be the epitome of obedience. It made me pause to reconsider. He was right. My excitement at seeing Eileen had made me careless. While informing the servants Eileen was a noblewoman would undoubtedly be the easier lie to give, I was reluctant to do so. Considering Eileen was a future princess, I wanted her to embrace that identity as soon as possible, not to mention if Father thought she was a princess, it'd make it easier to convince him I should marry Eileen instead of Rheanna.

My mind lit with an idea. "The princess in the tower...Alastar, inform the servants that Eileen is Princess Gemma of Malvagarria."

He remained unmoving. "Princess Gemma? But Your Highness—"

"Now, Alastar."

Alastar sighed and trudged off to do my bidding. I watched with satisfied amusement as the footman's reaction to Eileen transformed the moment Alastar whispered in his ear.

He bowed crisply to her. "Forgive me for my rudeness. I didn't know who you were, Your Highness."

Her mouth popped open. "Oh no, I'm—I mean, there must be some mistake, for I'm not—"

"Please, come out of the rain."

He summoned her inside and a maid bustled over to assist her. Finally, my Eileen was being treated with the respect she deserved. Despite being drenched and cold, she seemed to object to the attention. It was with clear reluctance that she allowed one of the maids to wrap her arm around her and lead her upstairs.

I nodded, satisfied. She would be attended to and soon I could see her. In the meantime, I had to plot on how to ensure my choice of bride won the competition according to Father's dictates.

"May I speak freely, Your Highness?"

Alastar had returned, looking more serious than ever. I waved my hand lazily for him to proceed before heading for the grand staircase to follow the trail of water Eileen had dripped in her ascent. The maid would be leaving her room shortly, giving me the opportunity to inquire after her wellbeing.

"Forgive me, Prince Aiden, but this is insane."

I paused halfway up the stairs and cocked an eyebrow. "Insane? It's providence. I want to marry Eileen and what better way than to choose her in this competition? As you can see, everything is going according to plan."

"But she's not a princess."

"Not yet," I corrected.

"That doesn't change the fact that the poor girl will be competing with polished noblewomen who have been bred their entire lives for the task. She'll easily be found out."

I shook my head, dismissing the possibility. "I'll help her. In the meantime, I can spend time with her."

"Be that as it may be, you've just put her in a situation that I'm sure she finds distressing."

I rolled my eyes. Now his arguments were getting ridiculous. "What's distressing about allowing a common girl to enjoy the pleasures of royal life?"

"But—"

“Enough,” I snapped, and he obediently fell silent. That was better. I resumed walking and turned a corner to enter the guest quarters, my heart drawing me near her room far more effectively than the water trail I followed. “Now, you will protect her while she’s here, ensure she’s cared for and safe. Do you understand me?”

“But Your Highness—”

“Alastar, please.” I paused to rest my hand on his shoulder. “She means everything to me. This is the only way. Please help me.”

He searched my expression before his shoulders slumped in defeat. “I still think it’s risky, but because of our friendship and how much she clearly means to you, I will honor your request.”

I beamed. Eileen now felt closer to me than ever before. This silly competition would only prove to Father what I already knew: there was no doubt we belonged together.