

~Drake's Perspective: Discovered by the Queen~

In the years I'd been confined to this prison, I'd never wanted to escape more than I did now. I pressed against the walls surrounding me, as if by sheer will alone I could break free, but even though I was trapped within glass I couldn't put so much as a crack in the magic containing me. I slumped against the mirror frame, mentally exhausted from my effort to fight against the curse that bound me.

The hurt filling Rhea's eyes filled my mind. Regret tightened my chest and I tried once more to break free, desperate to apologize, but as always the magic remained unyielding.

"Rhea? Please let me out. I'm sorry."

Silence followed my desperate call. I wasn't surprised; either she couldn't hear me from within the drawer where she'd shoved me inside or she was still too angry to respond. Not that I blamed her. I'd been mentally flogging myself for my stupidity from the moment I'd seen her hurt after learning I'd watched her outing with Briar from the parlor mirror.

My remorse pressed harder against my chest and the limited space around me seemed to close in around me, causing the helplessness that constantly held me hostage to escalate. I forced myself to still so I could close my eyes and take a steadying breath. But I didn't calm; if anything, my desperation to get free increased. I had to; I needed to earn Rhea's forgiveness, even though I didn't deserve it.

I slowly opened my eyes and looked around the small space that had been my home these past however many years I'd been a prisoner. Even after all this time, it was almost impossible to remember I was inside a *mirror*. My prison consisted of a space no bigger than a broom cupboard, a room that was spacious enough to avoid claustrophobia but too confining for me to move around in, even to sit.

I traced the ornate carvings which made up the silver walls of my prison, whose patterns I'd long since memorized with the lack of nothing else to do. My gaze drifted to the only window that allowed me to see the outside world, which currently showed nothing except the dark wood that was the inside of Rhea's desk drawer. The view hadn't altered in several hours, which meant Rhea was still mad.

Note to self: spying on the girl you fancy is never a good idea. For the countless time since our fight, I cursed myself for having been idiotic enough to learn that lesson

the hard way, depriving myself of Rhea's company that was the only highlight of my enchanted prison.

And my foolishness had caused me to lose it.

I set my jaw in determination. No, I refused to let her go so easily. I'd grovel forever until I earned her forgiveness. Rhea wasn't one to hold a grudge; she'd forgive me—even though I thoroughly didn't deserve it—and we'd be friends again.

Until I allowed my jealousy to do another stupid thing.

Unbidden, my mind drifted back at the nauseating memory of Rhea flirting with my pathetic brother, especially the almost triumphant look that had filled Briar's eyes as he realized how close he was to winning his prize. I clenched my fists. The lout didn't deserve someone as sweet as Rhea.

Nor do you, my conscience reminded myself. My gut twisted at the reminder of my fight with Rhea that had led her to shove me inside this drawer, especially of the hurt in her expression. But even though the memory was painful, my lips twitched as I remembered the fierceness that had filled her eyes; fire hid beneath her sweet demeanor.

One of the many reasons why you love her.

My heart jolted and I hastily amended my thoughts.

One of the many reasons why you hold her in such esteem. She's your friend. Nothing more.

A curse filled my mind the moment I thought the words. Lying was utterly pointless, yet even so, it was difficult to admit the truth. How ironic that it was so easy to be forthright with everyone except for myself.

How had this happened? It wasn't part of the plan. But when had anything about my situation ever gone according to plan?

My ears perked when a sound pierced the suffocating silence—footsteps, followed by the sound of rummaging, muffled by the wood of the drawer that separated me from Rhea's bedroom, but unmistakable all the same.

"Rhea?" I called. "Is that you?"

The footsteps paused, causing my heart to lift in hope. She'd heard me.

"Please let me out," I said. "I'm truly sorry for spying on you. I just wanted—"

What? To torture myself by seeing my underserving brother, whom I'd never liked, court the woman I wanted for myself? But that was no excuse for my behavior, not when it had caused me to hurt Rhea.

"I promise I'll never betray your trust in that way again."

I winced. Even though my words were sincere, they felt like a lie. *You're betraying her trust by causing her to fall for you so you can be free, but if she ever finds out...*

Guilt swept over me, just as it always did when I remembered that my freedom would only come if I got a princess to fall in love with me, the one thing I couldn't ask of Rhea, not after I'd learned about what had happened between her and Prince Deidric. I refused to treat her in the way that I had. And yet that was exactly what I was doing, which only proved I didn't deserve her.

It didn't matter; I couldn't have had her anyway—not only was she off limits, I was in no position to woo anyone...and yet I couldn't help but desire to all the same. Although I wanted nothing more than to be free, I was motivated by a stronger desire—I wanted to be free in order to be with *her*.

But it was an impossible wish. Helplessness, even greater than when I'd first been cursed, pressed against me at the thought.

I was torn from my thoughts as footsteps approached the drawer I was confined in...clicking footsteps, unlike the way Rhea usually walked. Her footsteps were quiet and hesitant, as if she wanted to make as little noise as possible to avoid drawing attention to herself, although lately they'd been becoming more confident, just like she was, a fact which thrilled me.

I felt the drawer open, causing light from Rhea's bedroom to pierce the darkness that had previously surrounded me. My heart lifted in relief. "Have you finally felt sorry for me?"

But it wasn't Rhea who looked down at me.

I cursed. Mother lifted an elegant black brow before her lips pursed in disapproval at the bitter obscenity. "What a way to greet your mother."

I bit the inside of my cheek to muffle the sigh longing to escape. It was quite a tricky balance dealing with Mother and I'd had little practice since becoming trapped within the mirror.

So I did the next best thing. I explored the faint magic within the mirror and gripped it tightly, pulling on it so I could withdraw from sight within the mirror's glass.

While Mother could no longer see me, unfortunately I could still see her...along with her fierce glower.

"Don't you dare leave when I'm speaking with you. Come back this instant."

I ignored her, struggling to cling to the power that kept me out of sight. Mother's grip around the mirror's handle tightened, constricting my chest, forcing me to release my shaky hold on the magic and to yank me back into view.

I winced. "Ow."

She loosened her hold but only slightly and pulled me from the drawer. I used the opportunity to frantically search Rhea's room. There was no sign of her.

Mother smirked. "Looking for someone?"

I hastily returned my gaze back to hers. "Of course not."

By the hard glint filling Mother's eyes, I knew she'd detected my lie, just as she always did. "Rheanna isn't here. Do you truly believe I'd be foolish enough to retrieve you if she were? She's visiting her brother."

The visit was likely painful for her. My heart reached out to her, in the way it always did whenever Rhea was hurting. "How is Liam?"

Mother shrugged, not appearing the least bit concerned that the Crown Prince of Draceria's health was in a precarious state. "Not good, from what I've heard."

Although her expression was solemn, I knew her too well to believe her sadness was sincere, for her eyes were filled with the same eager look she had whenever discussing Father's declining health; I knew she eagerly awaited the day he finally died.

Her feigned remorse vanished almost in an instant. She shut the desk drawer with a snap. "Poor dear, has that ridiculous princess been keeping you in a drawer this entire time?"

"Only for a day, and only because I deserved it."

Mother's eyes widened. "You'd never deserve such heartless treatment."

I remained silent on that point, still too ashamed that I'd spied on the woman I cared for. "I suspected I'd receive a visit from you sooner or later," I said instead. For when she'd spotted me in Rhea's possession, I knew it was only a matter of time before she acted—Rhea possessing me ruined all her plans. Even though I knew this, I didn't want my time with the princess to end.

"I hope your time in the mirror has humbled you and made you compliant to the duty expected of you, but considering I found you in Rheanna's desk drawer, I highly

doubt it." Her dark eyes narrowed in a glare that, even after all these years, still made me flinch. "You were supposed to lure a princess to that tower."

I lifted my brows in mock confusion. "You mean *Princess Rheanna* isn't a princess? I was under the impression she was. My mistake for not asking her to provide her genealogy when she discovered me."

Mother's glare sharpened. "Don't use that attitude with me; you know what I meant."

I widened my eyes innocently. "On the contrary, I find myself confused, for Rheanna is a princess, and I was under the impression you considered it my filial duty to align myself with one."

"Your duty is to align yourself with Princess Aveline or Princess Elodie, not her," Mother snapped. "You know Rheanna is to have an arrangement with Briar."

Didn't I know it. I gritted my teeth as the image from yesterday's spying expedition returned full force—Rhea's coy smile as she flirtatiously caressed my brother's elbow, an image that made me see red.

"Is she?" I asked. "Then you should have no fear of her falling in love with *me*." Not that she was in any danger of doing so, even if Briar hadn't been in the picture. A woman like Rhea didn't fall in love with someone as snarky as me, not when our entire relationship had been based on a lie, one I regretted more and more with each passing day.

"The fact she's resorted to carrying you around with her makes me fear that perhaps she will, if she hasn't already."

I highly doubted that, and Mother would too if she'd witnessed Rhea's frustration and the force with which she shoved me inside and slammed the desk drawer.

And yet...part of me still hoped. I'd caught enough hints that perhaps Rhea's feelings for me were deeper than friendship—the soft way she looked at me, the sweet way she smiled, the way she lit up as we conversed as easily as if we'd been friends our entire lives, and the way time no longer held any meaning when we were together.

I gave my head a violent shake to clear it. *Stop, you can't fall in love with Rhea. Mother's right; she's meant for Briar.* My burning envy returned at the thought of them together.

I was in serious trouble.

"Rhea and I are just friends," I said, more to convince myself than to convince Mother.

Her dark eyes narrowed darkly. "*Rhea?*"

"Rheanna," I hastily corrected. Her formal name was awkward on my tongue.

Mother didn't say anything for a long, agonizing moment, her look icy and penetrating.

"Mm," she finally murmured, and I read far too many unpleasant things in that *Mm*. It took everything in me not to shift beneath her accusing gaze. Instead I met it straight on with a defiant one of my own. "Be careful, Drake," she said in a warning tone.

"Considering I'm inside a mirror, punishment is the least of my concerns." What more could she do to me that she hadn't already?

"Believe me, dear, you'd be surprised." I didn't like the calculating look in her eyes. "Now let's try this again: why did you lure Rheanna to your tower when you know perfectly well that she's the one I chose for Briar?"

"The one *you* chose? Shouldn't he have been the one to make that choice?" I didn't even bother to mask my annoyance.

"Briar doesn't know what's best for him, and neither do you. Rheanna is not the princess for you."

Then why did the time we spent together feel so *right*? Why did I take pleasure in everything she did and think of her constantly when we were apart? I never imagined I'd feel this way about anyone, especially her.

When Rhea had first discovered me, I hadn't intended to choose her, especially after I learned she was Briar's intended. Despite not getting along with my brother, I had enough honor not to woo his girl. But her feisty insistence had immediately surprised and fascinated me, causing me to realize that deep within this shy, sweet woman was a fire that was not only quite appealing, but one I was desperate to discover more of.

"I didn't choose Rhea—*Rheanna*—the magic did."

Surprise flickered in Mother's gaze before the emotion faded. She pursed her lips. "Explain."

I sighed. "When I was in that tower, whatever charm you put on the mirror guided her to me. I had nothing to do with it."

"Then you should have convinced her to give you to one of her sisters instead. You've wasted too much time with her when you could have been wooing one of them."

I shuddered at the thought of wooing anyone other than Rhea. "I tried. She didn't like the idea. She can be rather stubborn."

My lips twitched at the memory of the passion and determination that had filled her eyes the moment I made the suggestion someone else should break my curse. It had been the first moment that had stirred *something* within my heart, and it had only repeated several times since.

"You should have tried harder," Mother snapped. "Rheanna is a weak-willed girl. It should have been effortless, which gives you no excuse for your failure."

I almost snorted but knew such a move would be unwise. Mother clearly didn't know Rhea at all if she believed *that*; as always, she only saw what she wanted to see.

But I knew better than to argue...on that point, at least. "I still don't understand why you're so upset. Why does a *princess* have to free me?"

"You know why. You're simply choosing to ignore the fact that as a prince, it's your duty to forge an advantageous alliance."

"I can forge an alliance even if a stipulation of the curse didn't involve a princess being the one to free me. Why—"

Mother rolled her eyes impatiently. "Because that's the conditions of the curse."

"But you created the curse," I said. "Can't you therefore amend—"

Her eyes widened. "Are you insinuating that I cursed you, my own son, *on purpose*?" She shook her head. "It was an accident. You know that."

Did I, though? I knew I *wanted* to believe that—for the alternative was much worse—but wanting to and actually doing so weren't the same thing, especially when a dark secret seemed to lurk in her eyes whenever we spoke of it, one that made me doubt her. If I was honest with myself, I'd been doubting her ever since the curse first claimed me.

"It seems quite convenient that your *accident* can only be reverted by my doing the very thing we previously fought about my not doing before now," I muttered.

She said nothing for a moment, her look dark and dangerous. "It seems your time in the mirror hasn't made you more cooperative like I'd hoped," she finally said, each word slow and deliberate. "When you were first cursed, you assured me that it'd be

easy to trick an unsuspecting woman into granting you your freedom. Your confidence caused me to foolishly have faith in you, but I can clearly see I was mistaken. What's changed?"

Everything. For I now felt things for Rhea I never imagined I could feel, but I couldn't bear to win her affections in a less than honorable way.

"What's changed, Drake?" Mother's tone was darkening.

I tightened my jaw and didn't answer, but it seemed as if my response wasn't needed. Mother stared long and hard at me, as if trying to pry apart the bars guarding my secrets.

She must have found them, for her eyes widened with a gasp. "No...you didn't."

"Didn't what?" I stuttered, even though I had a sinking feeling I knew what she referred to.

Trepidation knotted my gut as her red-lips curled at the corners. I didn't like the look of that emerging smirk. "Do you fancy yourself *in love* with the ridiculous girl?"

Blast. I lifted my chin defiantly. "You think I'm in love with her?" I rolled my eyes, but I knew the gesture couldn't mask my true feelings, which was dangerous; I'd hate to imagine what Mother would do if she knew the truth.

Her expression hardened, making me realize that it was too late. "Your time in the mirror has clearly addled your mind. The girl is pathetic."

"Don't you dare speak of her in such a way." Hot, searing anger washed over me the way it always did when I heard about Mother's cruelty towards Rhea, but now I could finally defend her. "She's wonderful, and sweet, and—"

My words died in my throat at Mother's nasty sneer. "I see what's really been going on. You've allowed your foolish feelings to get in the way of your duty. Regardless of what you *think* you feel for her, you will cease at once."

"I can't just stop—"

"You will," she said with finality, as if I could simply choose not to love Rhea anymore. "For even though she doesn't deserve the honor in the least, she's intended for Briar, and I refuse to let you ruin my plans."

"You can't do anything more to me," I said. "Not after you've already trapped me."

By her responding chilling smirk, I realized I'd gone too far. Her nails dug into the mirror's handle as her grip tightened. "It'd be in your best interest not to tempt me. Now, I'll tell you one more time what I expect: I'm going to leave your mirror in

Princess Elodie's room, and you're going to work your charm on her. She's silly enough and desperate enough for a match to be easily persuaded to marry you. If you don't comply, perhaps I might accidentally do something to your *Rhea*."

Fear clenched my heart. I lowered my eyes in compliance, which was enough for Mother to realize she'd broken me. She carried me from Rhea's room and snuck into Elodie's, where she placed me on the vanity to await to be discovered.

But just because Elodie found my mirror didn't mean I had to reveal myself to her; if I had my way, she wouldn't even have a chance to discover my mirror. I futilely tried to exert enough energy to enter Rhea's vanity mirror so I could alert her that I'd been stolen, but the fight with Mother had exhausted me in more ways than one, and I could barely even catch a flickering glimpse of a view outside another mirror, let alone enter one.

I slumped against the side of the mirror, but I refused to allow Mother to bend me to her will. I'd spent my life defying her—it was how I'd ended up cursed in the first place—and I wasn't about to stop now.

Mother wanted me to let Rhea go, to trick another princess into falling in love with me, but I refused to go along with such a scheme, especially if it would be Rhea I'd deceive and inevitably hurt. If I couldn't get out of this mirror without hurting her, then I wouldn't get out at all.

I'd rather remain trapped for eternity than lose her.