

## NOTE FOR ANY ASPIRING AUTHORS READING THIS:

This is a great example of a scene that isn't needed. I was a lot less experienced when I wrote this (*Akarnae* was the first book I ever attempted, and this scene was in the very first draft) and I also had a horsey background and a heap of equine-related knowledge (and passion, lol), so to my thinking, *surely* everyone would be interested in reading about the layout of a stable complex and the introduction of a cute little pony who had a quirky personality. (Turns out, it's maybe not that fascinating to most people?? \*Awkward laugh\*) And while some parts of this deleted scene are fun, it doesn't add anything to the overall plot of the book, so it became a "kill your darlings" editing lesson for me, and I deleted it long before I ever began submitting this manuscript to publishers.

So the takeaway from this is: when you're writing, despite how much a scene might mean to you, always keep in mind whether or not it's actively moving the story along. Because while sometimes it's okay to add filler scenes to help develop the characters or to add foreshadowing or whatever, nine times out of ten it's really unnecessary and your story (and readers) will thank you for cutting it!

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### DELETED SCENE:

#### ALEX'S FIRST EQUESTRIAN SKILLS CLASS (AND MEETING MONSTER)

— UNEDITED —

Ready for her first Equestrian Skills class, Alex left her room and headed to the stable complex, which was located close to the forest on the western edge of the grounds. She paused when she reached her destination, wondering exactly where she was meant to go. Should she head inside or wait for someone to come out? She had assumed it would be obvious, but she also hadn't realised just how big the complex would be. She waited, hoping one of her new classmates would be along shortly. She was still early, after all.

Looking around at the well-maintained building, Alex closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. It smelled like leather and pine trees and fresh-cut grass. And horse, of course. Combined, it was a smell that she loved, taking her back to her childhood. She inhaled again, relaxing, and opened her eyes.

"Figures," someone mumbled, directly behind her.

Alex jumped, startled, and turned to the voice. It was the antagonistic red-headed girl, her blue-green eyes narrowed at Alex as she brushed past her into the building.

After a moment, Alex hesitantly followed the girl into the stables. There were three other people waiting inside—a girl and two boys—and soon enough, another two girls appeared. Of all the students, Alex realised she and the redhead were the youngest.

Alex considered the hostile girl again, noting as she had in their other shared classes that the redhead was a bit of a loner, keeping to herself. Even here, while their other classmates were huddled together, talking and laughing, the girl wasn't joining in.

In all honesty, Alex didn't really care what the girl's deal was, she just wished the redhead would lay off the glaring, since it wasn't as if Alex had done anything to offend her. She'd only been at the academy for less than day—nowhere near long enough to have made an enemy yet. Or at all.

Alex was torn from her thoughts when their teacher arrived. The woman had a natural, out-of-doors look about her. She was young, probably in her early thirties, and had dark skin, hair, and eyes, with a well-toned physique from many years of handling creatures much larger and stronger than herself.

The teacher spared a glance at Alex before turning to the other students and calling out instructions.

“Emma, you've got Rockie,” she said to one of the girls, who nodded before walking off down one of the stable aisles.

“Ryan, you're with Captain”—one of the boys walked away—“Frankie, Shadow”—the other boy walked off—“Megan, you've got Firefly. Julia, you're with Bungle”—the two other girls walked off. Now it was just Alex, the redhead, and their instructor.

“Alexandra Jennings, right?” the woman asked.

“Alex.”

“I'm Therese Lawton,” the teacher said. “Most people just call me Tayla. How much experience have you had around horses, Alex?”

“A little,” Alex said. She didn't want to sound like she was bragging, especially not with the other girl still standing there with them. “I used to ride a lot when I was younger, and I entered a few small competitions. Eventing, mostly.”

Both of them looked at her weirdly. She wondered what she had said wrong, before realising that perhaps this world didn't have equestrian competitions. It was too late to take it back, though. She'd have to be more careful before she spoke in the future.

“Right. Well, just because you've, uh, done some ‘competitions,’ I'll still be the judge of your experience. No one messes around in my stables. You might have Epsilon potential, but if you can't handle the physical requirements of the class while treating the horses with

care and respect, then you'll be spending every lesson cleaning tack and mucking out stalls. Understood?"

"Of course," Alex agreed quickly. She would have been surprised had she not been given the lecture.

"Very well," Tayla said. "Your first few classes will involve horse care and handling only. If I feel you're capable, you'll then be allowed to ride. But you'll first have to prove yourself."

Alex accepted that as well. She would've preferred to ride from the get-go, but if she had to gain the right, then she would do what was required first.

Tayla turned to the other girl. "Can you show Alex around the complex?"

The girl didn't look pleased, her lips pressing into a thin line.

"After she's seen everything, show her where she can find Monster," Tayla continued telling the redhead. "Then come join the rest of us in the schooling ring for your riding lesson. You're with Whinny today."

The girl nodded her reluctant agreement. Tayla then turned back to Alex.

"Once you know where everything is, you'll spend the class taking care of one of the horses. I expect you to clean out Monster's stall before catching him and bringing him in from the field. You'll groom him, rug him and feed him. Only then will you be free to go."

That seemed a bit ridiculous to Alex. It surely wasn't going to take her the whole two-hour class to look after just one horse, even if he was as large as his name implied. But she wasn't about to question the woman. Perhaps she'd have a chance to watch the others in their riding lesson once she was done. She was curious how skilled their Epsilon level might be.

After finishing her instructions, Tayla strode off down one of the aisles, leaving Alex alone with the other girl.

"So... do you have a name?" Alex asked, in an attempt to be friendly.

The redhead said nothing, only looked at her flatly before spinning on her heel and walking away, making Alex scramble to catch up to her.

For the next ten minutes, Alex was led on a tour around the stable complex, and she soon realised it was much more than what she had expected. She had assumed it would be a couple of stalls and maybe a tack and feed room, not an elaborately set up compound. Her jaw almost dropped when she realised the extent of the facility. If there was a horse heaven, it was possible that this was where they would come to. The place was incredible.

On the far side of the complex, a large doorway led to an immense sand arena—the schooling ring Tayla had mentioned. Half of the space was covered by a roof while the other

half was left open to the elements. Tiered seats rose up alongside the edges of the arena, making Alex wonder if they had their own version of competitions here in which spectators could come to watch.

The redhead kept her dialogue to a minimum, her expression discouraging Alex from asking any questions, regardless of her curiosity. Instead, Alex paid close attention to the few details her escort offered and sought to remember where everything was.

The middle of the complex held the tack and feed rooms, and the stables for the horses. An office was also there, along with male and female locker rooms complete with their own bathrooms. When Alex asked why there were showers when the dormitory building wasn't too far away, the redhead just looked at her as if she was something attached to the bottom of her shoe, then walked off without answering.

The other girl continued to lead her through the complex, and as they walked past the individual stalls, she grudgingly explained that while the academy had over fifty horses currently residing on the grounds, only those that were used for riding were kept in the stables, as well as those who required special care.

Alex wanted to ask how the horses she'd seen in the field the day before remained within the grounds when there were no fences, but she knew she wouldn't get an answer. Instead, she focused on the names engraved onto the stable doors: *Wilburr*, *T-Rex*, *Raffles*, *Pinocchio*, *Bella*, *Dancer*, *Stargazer*, *BoBo*, *Ketchup*, *Fiddle*. The names continued in a whirl until one made Alex pause. *Nala*. She peered inside the stall, but the fiery mare wasn't in there. There was a second door on the far side of the stall which was open, leading out into the field beyond. Most likely Nala was off grazing somewhere. But Alex hadn't forgotten the beautiful creature she'd met when she had first arrived at the academy.

She turned around to find her guide staring at her oddly. At least she wasn't glaring this time. The redhead swiftly looked away, however, and continued walking. Alex was surprised that she'd waited in the first place, and hurried after her yet again.

A quick tour of the rest of the complex showed that the opposite end to the schooling ring opened to an area brushing up against the dense forest encircling the academy.

"We often go for rides in the forest," the redhead said. "While the schooling ring is used to improve our riding technique, the forest is used for combat and survival training with the horses. Archery and other forms of fighting are practised while mounted, along with vaulting and all sorts of cross-country training."

Alex was impressed. No doubt this class would be a lot more interesting and dangerous than she had originally thought. The prospect excited her. She loved riding and readily

anticipated the challenges of the class. Now she just had to prove that she was capable of looking after a horse before she was allowed to sit on one.

In the meantime, the longer her tour lasted, the edgier Alex became at the idea of handling Monster. If she was supposed to spend the whole class on one horse, he must be quite the handful. Tayla was no doubt testing her. But if there was one thing Alex knew, it was that horses could sense emotions, so she cast away her anxiety before following her escort outside the complex.

The red-headed girl stood looking into the distance for a long moment before raising her hand. “See that group over there?” She indicated a few horses grazing far enough away that it was difficult to distinguish anything about them other than their general shape. “Monster’s with them. You know where his stall is now, so once you’ve cleaned it, go catch him and follow the rest of Tayla’s instructions.”

The girl started to walk away, so Alex quickly said, “Wait! How am I supposed to know which one is Monster?”

The redhead didn’t turn around, but called over her shoulder, “You’ll know.”

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“Sure, give the new girl an impossible task,” Alex grumbled to herself as she walked towards the group of horses. She’d already mucked out the allocated stable and refilled the bedding—an interesting mixture of a substance similar to sawdust along with woodchips of some kind and shredded straw—and now had to locate the horse to which it belonged.

Alex eyed the horses she was carefully approaching. She hid the rope she was holding behind her back, keeping in mind her previous experiences of catching horses that didn’t want to leave the pasture. It was better to not give away her agenda just yet, lest they run off leaving her to chase them all afternoon.

None of the horses in the group fit the description she would have thought matched the name ‘Monster’; none looked massive compared to the others, nor did any act aggressively. In fact, none responded negatively to her presence at all. While some watched her warily, most of them just continued grazing. There were seven in this small group. Which one was she supposed to take with her?

Alex sighed and crouched down onto the grass near them. What was she to do?

Just as she was contemplating her next move, which centred around going back to ask someone else at the stables to point out Monster, a few of the horses shifted away from each other, revealing another she hadn't noticed.

Alex couldn't contain her snort. There was no doubt that this was Monster. What had the redhead said? "*You'll know.*" Oh, how funny, Alex thought dryly.

The horse—if you could call him that—was a mixed breed of miniature pony. He barely even reached Alex's hip. She'd seen some dogs bigger than the shaggy little creature.

Monster, indeed.

Alex shook her head in amusement and stood up again. She couldn't believe she'd actually been anxious about handling what she had thought was going to be a massive and possibly even dangerous horse. She looked at the calmly-grazing pony and chuckled. This was going to be easy.

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One hour later, Alex collapsed onto the grass, breathing heavily. She lifted her sweaty head to look at the stubborn little pony that refused to let her get anywhere near him. Every time she managed to make it within a few feet, he'd kick up his hooves and bolt off again, leaving her to chase after him.

It was embarrassing. And ridiculously frustrating.

She'd caught plenty of horses before, but none of them as mischievous as this little brat. Alex realised she needed a new plan if she was going to catch the beast.

One idea had potential. She lay her head back on the ground, closing her eyes. Horses were naturally curious animals. It wasn't long before she heard the light clumping noise which alerted her to the pony drawing close. Alex remained still, grasping the rope in her hand and waiting for the perfect opportunity.

She knew that what she was about to do was potentially dangerous. If she startled him, he could possibly trample her. But after endlessly chasing him across the field, she was willing to risk injury in order to finally catch him.

Alex felt his soft nose nuzzling at her leg, then her arm, and she felt the warm gust of air every time he breathed out from smelling her. Finally, the little horse was nudging at her face, and she knew that her best opportunity would be now while he was so close to her. She

snapped her eyes open and quickly threw one end of the rope around the pony's neck, reaching for it as it fell down the other side. Monster squealed and jumped—thankfully away from her—and gathered himself to take off again, but this time Alex was ready. She leapt up and planted her feet, holding firmly to both ends of the rope which was effectively noosed around the pony's neck.

He may have been a small horse, but he still weighed considerably more than Alex, and he tried to drag her across the field with him. Even so, she refused to budge. The rope was chaffing at her hands and she felt the uncomfortable burn of her flesh scraping raw, but she also knew that if she let him go, she would just have to start all over again. Their tug-of-war continued in a battle of wills, each trying to outlast the other.

Finally, Monster relaxed, and Alex almost lost her footing at the abrupt change of pressure on the rope. Thinking it might be a clever trick for her to let her guard down, Alex remained rooted to the spot. But after a few minutes, the pony took a step closer to her. Then another. He rubbed his head against her side, almost like a dog would if asking for someone to scratch behind his ears.

Alex carefully gathered both ends of the rope in one hand and cautiously petted the pony with the other. He leaned into her touch and closed his eyes in pleasure. He really was adorable—when he wasn't making her run around after him.

“Come on, you little monster,” she murmured, keeping her voice gentle and soothing as she began to lead him back towards the stables, which were now a significant distance away from where they had started.

Monster followed without trouble. Now that he was caught, he seemed to be happy enough just to plod along after her, much to her relief.

By the time they reached the stable complex, the sun was starting to go down on the horizon. Alex wondered if perhaps her class was finished when she couldn't see any other people around. It didn't matter though, as she still had to finish up with Monster before she could leave.

Grabbing a halter from outside of his stall—which hadn't been there before, she noted resentfully—she strapped it around the pony's head and clipped the rope onto it, before tying him up and starting to brush his long shaggy coat.

While Alex loved riding the majestic creatures, she also enjoyed handling them in every other way too. Grooming had always been relaxing to her. It was such a mindless job and she could let her thoughts wander as she brushed, stroke after stroke. Alex started to hum and

watched as Monster closed his eyes and drooped his head, almost falling asleep from her ministrations.

She didn't rush the grooming process—though she easily could have so she could leave sooner—and eventually he was sparkling clean again. His shaggy dark coat was free from the dirt of rolling in the pasture, and his mane and tail flowed loosely after a thorough combing. Satisfied, Alex found a blanket on the rail outside his stall and threw it over him, before untying him and leading him inside.

The moment she let him go he, dropped to his knees and rolled about in his stall, kicking up the loose bedding.

Alex sighed and shook her head at him. Pleased at least that his stall was clean and the blanket would protect his coat, she bolted the door and headed to the feed room, only to stop in the doorway, uncertain.

She'd expected the feed room to be the same as ones she'd been in before, with big containers holding different sorts of grains and chaff, maybe some supplements as well. And then, of course, hay. But the room was empty except for a cluster of buckets and a water hose.

Alex hesitantly entered the space, wondering if the redhead had given her the wrong directions. Something on the far side of the room caught her eye before she could back out, though.

All the buckets had names engraved onto them.

It didn't take long for Alex to find Monster's bucket, but it was empty. She picked it up and walked over to the water hose, wondering where the feed was. Confused, she sat on a wooden bench and examined the bucket, only to discover a small star-like engraving just under his name. On a hunch, Alex pressed her finger to the star, and immediately the bucket was full of grain. It had appeared out of nowhere, just like their meals in the Food Court.

Alex shook away her surprise and added water to the bucket before mixing it and heading back to Monster's stall. When she arrived, she noticed that the pony was already munching on some hay, realising it must have magically appeared at the same time as the grain in the bucket.

Completely awed, Alex unbolted the door and attached the feed bucket to the stall before giving Monster a final pet and locking him in for the night.

"I'm impressed."

Alex jumped. She hadn't realised anyone was with her until Tayla stepped into view.

"Very few people manage to catch Monster, especially on their first go," the instructor said. "He must like you."



Alex was unsure what to say in response to the unexpected compliment. She settled for the truth. “I didn’t catch him on my first go. He tore me around the field for ages first.”

“And yet, you still managed to bring him in.”

Alex shrugged and brushed hair out of her eyes. Tayla’s gaze honed in on her rope-burned hands.

“Come with me,” the instructor said, turning on her heel.

Alex followed as the other woman led her to the small office and told her to take a seat. Tayla disappeared out the door for a few minutes before returning with a small silver container. She dragged a stool over to sit in front of Alex, asking her to hold out her hands.

“This will sting a little,” she warned, before scooping some salve out of the container and smearing it over Alex’s burns.

Alex hissed and bit her lip. ‘Sting’ was an understatement. But as Tayla gently massaged the ointment into Alex’s raw hands, the pain quickly turned into a cool, almost numb sensation.

“What is this stuff?” Alex asked, inhaling its pleasant vanilla-like scent.

Tayla continued to rub the cream into her hands as she answered, “It’s a healing salve. It contains an advanced analgesic which helps promote accelerated skin regrowth. Fletcher insists that I keep a jar handy. I think he gets sick of me sending students up to him.”

Analgesic—that meant it was a painkiller. It also explained the numb feeling.

Alex watched as the angry red burns faded into a pale pink colour before soon disappearing entirely. Tayla released her hands and sealed the container while Alex held her palms in front of her face. It was as if she’d never been hurt in the first place.

Noting her awed expression, Tayla chuckled and said, “Pretty neat, huh?”

“I’ll say,” Alex agreed, marvelling over her healed flesh.

“Come on, then,” Tayla said, rising from her seat. “Class is over. I’m heading to the Tower building, so I’ll walk you back to your dorm.”

Alex nodded mutely, still staring at her hands, but then she shook off her wonder and followed Tayla out of the office.

As they walked together across the fields in companionable silence, Alex was surprised to find that she didn’t feel uncomfortable around the other woman. While intimidatingly protective of her horses, Tayla had also shown a quiet gentleness when treating her wounded hands. Alex thought she would easily grow to like the Equestrian Skills teacher, and she was already looking forward to her next lesson.