

### \*~Deleted Scene: Accidental Touches~\*

The following afternoon I sat cross-legged on the floor in the parlor, munching on a sandwich as I sketched a scene I'd spent the morning observing in the garden—ants traveling to and from their ant hill, gathering and carrying food for their colony. A knock on the door tore me from my reverie. Liam stood in the doorway with a friendly smile just for me.

"Good afternoon, Lavena."

I stiffened at her name but managed to mask the reaction. "Good afternoon, Liam."

He entered the parlor with a bounce in his step and a shy but boyish grin. "I was hoping you'd join me for—" His smile faltered as he spotted my plate of sandwiches. "Oh, you're already eating."

Remorse knotted my stomach as I realized my mistake, made worse at the disappointment in his eyes. My cheeks burned.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't know you'd want to...I mean, we've never taken lunch together, so when you weren't in the dining room..." I trailed off and lowered my gaze.

He was silent a moment, an agonizing silence that I filled by wringing my napkin in my lap. "It's alright, Lavena. Please don't be upset. Developing the spouse skill of reading one another's mind will take time."

My gaze snapped up to his. He winked and the corner of his mouth quirked up. Warm relief filled me. I patted the spot beside me. He came over and settled beside me, also cross-legged, so closely our knees practically touched. Despite his easy smile, shyness filled his eyes, revealing the nervousness he felt in breaking years of contention in order to bridge the distance between us.

I offered him a teasing smile. "Is your easy forgiveness merely a ploy to steal my sandwiches?"

His grin broadened. "Caught me." He reached for one but I snatched the plate away and held it out of reach.

"Not so fast. I refuse to sacrifice my lunch so easily."

"Not even to your husband?"

"Even my husband has to cajole me into giving up my prized sandwiches."

"Oh really?" He wriggled his fingers. "Perhaps a bit of torture is a better persuasion?"

I gave a playful shriek and tried to crawl away, but he'd seized me from behind before I could even get very far. A jolt of heat spread over me from his arms wrapped around my waist. He reached around me and snagged a sandwich. With a triumphant whoop, he held it triumphantly up in the air.

"I, the incredible Prince Liam, have succeeded in obtaining my wife's coveted sandwich. Time to enjoy my spoils." He took an exaggerated bite before smirking at me. "I win."

I tried to look stern but his playfulness made it impossible, especially when he offered the plate in penance. I giggled and took one. "You're impossible to stay upset with."

"Because I'm so charming?" As he set the plate aside, his gaze lowered to my insect sketchbook laying nearby, the drawing of the ants exposed. His eyebrows rose in clear surprise.

"I didn't know you could draw. Wow, you're really good." He shoved the remainder of his sandwich into his mouth and wiped his fingers on his tunic before picking up my sketchbook to better examine it. "A strange subject; I expected one more feminine. Why ants?"

"I saw them during my walk." I fought to mask my flutter to avoid suspicion for having been caught behaving too much like Anwen. I tightened my hands in my lap, trying to push the tension filling my body away.

"You notice what most overlook—seemingly insignificant ants hidden amongst the beauty of the grounds."

I bit the inside of my lip to stifle the plethora of ant facts just aching to burst free. It wouldn't do to bore him when we were only just beginning to become friends.

He admired my drawing a bit longer before setting it aside and reaching to steal the last sandwich at the same time I did. Our fingers brushed against one another's. I gasped and yanked my hand away, startled not by the touch itself but my body's response to it—heated tingles rippling up my arm straight to my heart. His own breath hooked, as if he'd been affected, too. For a moment we stared at one another, my cheeks warm, his own expression flustered. He nudged the plate towards me.

"It's yours."

I managed a shy smile as I took it. Our accidental touch had created a foreign energy between us that while strange wasn't at all unpleasant. I wanted to explore it but knew this desire of mine wasn't one I, as Anwen, should have.

Liam cleared his throat. "Do you have any plans for this afternoon?" When I shook his head, he grinned and rubbed his hands together with a mischievous glint in his eyes. "Excellent, then it's time for me to slaughter you at cards."

I raised my eyebrow. "With such an opening you expect me to want to accept your invitation?"

He smirked. "Scared?"

"I have no need to be when I'm about to crush your ego."

He chuckled as he bounded from the room to retrieve the deck. When he returned, he sat back down next to me, several inches closer than he'd been before. He dealt, doing so with a strange and rapid pattern. I frowned at my cards. They seemed unusually poor.

A few rounds went by. As I studied my hand to decide what to play next, I detected movement near the discard pile. I glanced up and found Liam studying his own hand with a bit too much concentration. My lips twitched as a hunch settled over me. Time would tell whether or not it was correct.

I made it a point to look away quite frequently over the next several rounds of play. Each would be filled with Liam shifting and the sound of the cards rustling, but because he was quite subtle, it took me awhile to catch him in the act. Finally I peeked up in time to see him tuck the ace I'd just played up his sleeve.

"Interesting," I said. He flashed me an exaggerated smile, his look innocent...a bit too innocent.

"What's interesting, Lavena?"

"You."

"Me?" He straightened like a peacock. "Indeed I am, Lavena. I'm the most interesting man ever. How fortunate you are to have me for your husband. Now please don't keep me in suspense and tell me why you think so."

I smirked before I blinked at the discarded cards. "Where did my ace go?"

To his credit, his expression didn't even falter. In fact, it twisted into perfect puzzlement. "That's strange."

"Hmm, it is." I tapped my lips with my cards as I pretended to consider. "Ah, I've figured it out."

"Have you?" His grin became cheeky. "Where is it?"

I gave him my own exaggerated smile. "May I see your arm?"

His easy grin faltered slightly. "What for?"

I smirked at him over my cards. "You're wearing the look of a man possessing a guilty conscience, and for good reason— you're a cheater."

He chuckled. "Caught."

"Unsurprising. You weren't very good at it."

"I am, actually. You're the first person who's ever caught me. You're rather observant."

"Or everyone else is merely blind?"

"I'm rather talented at cheating." The way he announced it, you'd think he were bragging about a skill worth possessing. "I've refined my skills over the years," he said, completely unabashed.

I tsked and shook my head. "I'm quite shocked, dear husband."

He grinned unrepentantly as he gave an offhanded shrug. "I like to win."

"Clearly, although this means you cannot claim talent for cards, especially after I do this." I played my final card and his eyes widened. "This win belongs to me."

He gaped. "Did you still beat me despite my efforts to thwart you?"

"Even the most skilled player can best a cheater."

He sighed and threw his cards down. "You're quite the force to be reckoned with. I always knew you'd keep me on my toes in our marriage. Very well, I've been humbled. Another game, this one free from cheating?"

He started to gather the cards and I reached over to help him. Once again, our hands touched and a pleasant ripple jolted up my arm. We both gasped and yanked our hands away. We stared wide eyed at one another before he smiled and slowly reached out to touch the back of my hand, where he lightly traced a swirl, leaving a trail of blazing heat behind that caused me to shiver.

This shouldn't be happening. Liam wasn't mine, not when I was playing a part. I needed to pull away. He didn't know he wasn't touching Princess Lavena but her handmaiden instead. Yet no force could compel me to pull away.

I thought I'd melt from Liam's touch but he wasn't finished. He scooted closer to first tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear, his look concentrated, before he began rubbing my cheek forcefully with his thumb.

"You have a bit of dirt there. It's been driving me mad the entire game."

Dirt, a remnant of a moment I'd behaved not as the princess but as Anwen by studying the ants this morning. I stiffened and he yanked his hand away as if I'd burned him.

"I'm sorry," he said, cheeks crimson. "I should have asked..." He trailed off and I instantly regretted giving him the wrong impression. But I couldn't correct him, not when the real reason his touch had bothered me had to remain a secret, for I was still bound by the power of the ring to play out this charade, whether I wanted to or not.

I'd never wanted to end the charade more than I did now, all so I could be myself for Liam so that his recent touch could have been given to me rather than her.