

~Deleted Scene: Checkmate~

Liam escorted me to my room to change. I emerged to find him waiting for me, already in a fresh outfit himself. His gaze lingered on my hair, which I hadn't bothered styling despite the insistence of my maid, so that now it laid in dark clumps down my back. The princess would have a fit if she saw how I was representing her. I smirked at the thought. Excellent.

"Are you going to tell me the story behind that smile?" Liam asked. "I'm quite anxious to know."

"You seem quite invested in my smiles."

"Of course. They show me you're happy, which means I'm being the husband you deserve."

Despite my lingering chill, his words warmed me through, a warmth that only grew as he continued staring at my hair, his grin growing with his perusal.

"You look even lovelier than before, Lavena, if such a thing is possible." He ran his fingers through my hair. "I like this look on you."

"I thought I'd leave my wet hair down so that you'd be reminded of your crime of pushing your wife into the fountain and feel the proper guilt."

He chuckled before lowering his hand, running it down my arm to weave through mine. "It appears I must still earn your forgiveness. Perhaps when you see what I've got planned, you'll be inclined to extend it."

"Perhaps, unless I'm in the mood to witness your groveling for a bit longer."

He chuckled again as he led me down the hall. "I wouldn't mind doing more to spoil you." He escorted me to the library, where a chess board had been set up. "How about a game of chess, one where I promise not to cheat considering I'm striving to earn myself back into your good graces." He eyed me nibbling my lip. "Do you not like chess?"

"I don't know, I've never played."

He gasped as if I'd spoken blasphemy. "*Never?*" He tsked and shook his head. "First you'd never made paper boats, now you've never played chess. Thank heavens you married me, Lavena, so I could bring excitement into your life."

"Is that duty in the husband contract?" I asked as he helped me with my chair.

"No, it's part of the, 'let's make Lavena happy' quest I'm embarking on. Am I succeeding?" The look he gave me was adorably hopeful.

"That depends on whether I win this game or not."

While he smiled at my teasing, it didn't light up his eyes, which meant his question had been not part of our game but a genuine worry of his. Remorse for my poor response filled me. I cradled his cheek.

"I'm sorry, I should have responded honestly. You're making me happy."

His worry melted into relief. "I'm glad. You're making me happy, too." He twisted his face to press a kiss against my palm before straightening and settling in the seat across from me. "Are you ready for me to impart the secrets of chess?"

I chewed my lower lip. "Is it hard?"

"Not for you, I'm sure; I'm a rather dismal player." And he launched into explaining the rules in a rather disorderly fashion, as if he couldn't keep track of the rapid thoughts and tangents of his own mind. "There, simple enough, right?" he concluded some minutes later.

I stared blankly. He stroked his chin.

"I botched that explanation, didn't I?"

"Oh no, you were very...thorough." A bit too much so, especially considering he'd included several stories of past games and errors that had made his explanation even more difficult to follow.

He laughed. "You can't lie, Lavena, so don't even try, although I appreciate you trying to spare my feelings. Now I'll explain again, more slowly this time; I tend to get a bit excited." He ruffled the back of his hair with a bashful smile.

The second explanation was just as confusing, but by the third—for Liam seemed utterly determined to teach me, even if it took all day—I understood enough to make a tentative attempt to play.

"I'm going to lose," I said as Liam made his first move with a confident flourish.

"Nonsense, Lavena. I was too thorough of a tutor not to have given you a fair advantage."

I didn't have the heart to admit how little his tutoring had helped actually me. Like Liam, I was quite invested in each of his smiles, especially when they were directed towards me.

He walked me through my first few moves before giving me full reign. I didn't want to disappoint him by letting on how confused I was, so I picked up random pieces I was fairly confident on the movement of and was relieved he didn't stop me for any illegal plays. But I soon neglected too many of the other pieces and was forced to admit defeat.

"Despite you teaching me how to play three times, I still haven't the faintest idea what I'm doing." I randomly picked up a piece shaped like a castle but before I could play it Liam rested his hand over mine.

"Ssh, don't admit that out loud." He pressed his finger to my lips and leaned close, the warmth of his breath tickling my ear as he did so. "The pieces are listening so you don't want to admit your ignorance; you'll lose their loyalty."

I bit my lip to stifle my emerging smile. "Thank you for stopping me before I made such a grave error. Shall I apologize to the pieces?"

"You're their Commander. An apology will make you appear weak to your army. They need to respect you."

"Hence I should apologize?"

His lips twitched and pleasure shown in his eyes. "I see. You care more about doing what's right than about appearances?" He waved his hand towards my pieces, an invitation to proceed. "I suggest offering it to Their Majesties."

I gave both the king and queen pieces a pretty apology and the game continued. Given my lack of strategy, I naturally became suspicious when I noticed several turns later that I'd captured more pieces than Liam had. I studied his face. It seemed a bit too innocent.

"Are you letting me win?"

Guilt marred his expression before he rearranged it back to his innocent one. "Would I do that?"

"It appears I'm not the only terrible liar in this relationship."

He shrugged, unabashed. "I wanted your first experience to be a positive one so I can trick you into playing again."

"How sweet you're willing to sacrifice your manly pride so I can have a good time."

"What am I thinking? Time for an immediate change in strategy." He moved his knight with a flourish. "Checkmate."

I gaped at the board. "Already?"

“Indeed. I could have ended this game ten turns ago.” He leaned back with his usual grin, as always the picture of ease. “Despite losing, what do you think of chess?”

“It was...” I searched for a word that wouldn’t reveal I hadn’t particularly enjoyed the game. Liam chuckled.

“You didn’t like it, did you?”

I shrugged. He chuckled again, thankfully not appearing the least bit offended.

“Then in penance for forcing you to endure it, you’ll choose the next activity.”