

~Deleted Scene: Disappointing Birthday~

When I awoke to golden sunshine the following morning, it took me a moment to remember why I'd been dreading waking up today. Once I did I groaned.

Today was Anwen's birthday, but to everyone else—particularly Liam—it was just a regular day, for Princess Lavena's birthday wasn't until next week. I was less than enthusiastic to pretend it was a regular day for me, too. I rolled back over, wishing feebly for sleep to claim me for the remainder of the day so I wouldn't have to endure what would likely be one of many disappointments.

That plan was foiled when a soft knock sounded. I grumbled a curse Princess Lavena would be proud of as I sat up and glared at the door. I wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone, much less my maid.

"Come in," I said grumpily. The door opened, not the main one, but the connecting door, revealing Liam, already dressed. He cautiously poked his head across the threshold.

"Lavena?" He whispered, as if afraid of speaking too loudly and rousing me. I gritted my teeth to hear that name pass his lips today of all days.

"What?" I snapped. His eyes widened before wariness settled over him, the same look he'd worn our first week of marriage together, the look I hated. "I'm sorry," I said hastily. "Is there something you need?"

He frowned at me, whatever reason he'd ventured to my room before breakfast—something he'd never done before now—entirely forgotten. Finally, his expression cleared.

"I'm sorry to wake you; I know you're not a morning person."

I sighed. Anwen was an early riser, Princess Lavena was not. After our first week of marriage when I'd gotten up early as a way to try and spend time with him, I'd fallen back into the princess's habits—lingering in my room, stomach growling, as I wasted the beautiful morning away—in order to avoid rousing Liam's suspicions. It was torturous.

Liam studied me, seeming perplexed I was already awake, yet another chink in this ridiculous charade. I knew I should do something to dispel his confusion but today I especially wasn't in the mood to pretend.

"What is it, Liam?" I asked.

He visibly relaxed at my softened tone. "Forgive my intrusion. May I come in? Even though...you're in your night things?" Crimson stained his cheeks. I sat up and patted the spot beside me.

"I don't mind. Please, sit down." I spoke as if I was inviting him to join me for tea but the formality helped me quell my emotions, both nervous and excited at this surprising beginning of my birthday. Perhaps birthday magic was at work behind the scenes, allowing me some pleasures to enjoy in what would otherwise be an entirely ordinary day.

He closed the door behind him, hesitated, then opened it a crack, as if a married couple being alone behind closed doors was improper. He settled beside me with a shy smile.

"I feel bad waking you early and seeing you...unpresentable." His gaze flickered to my outfit and he blushed before severing his gaze.

I giggled. "I'm modest, Liam. Besides, we're married."

He grinned crookedly. "We are." He inched his hand closer to rest it on top of mine. My heartbeat immediately escalated. "I'm glad you're already awake so I didn't have to wake you."

I raised my eyebrow. "But you intended to? What could have compelled you to something so drastic?"

He chuckled and the sound seemed to ease his nerves. "So I could see you. I have meetings all day that will likely go until this evening."

"What?" He'd never had meetings for so long so why now, on my birthday? It wasn't fair.

He eyed my pout before lightly tracing his finger over it. "You don't want me to go?"

"Please, Liam, not today." I hadn't fully realized how acute my ache to spend my birthday with him was until the opportunity had been stolen from me.

"You mean my responsible wife who encourages me to be more dutiful in my role wants me to *skip*?"

I looked at him pleadingly. "Please?"

His expression crumpled. "I can't. I'm sorry, dear."

I whimpered and fell into his. He stroked my hair, attempting to soothe.

"I know I have more meetings today than usual but perhaps you'll be appeased when you realize why: I've arranged with my father for us to schedule most of our meetings these next few days so I can take your entire birthday off next week."

I didn't give one whit about Princess Lavena's birthday, only about *mine*. But I wasn't supposed to care about my real birthday, not when Anwen was supposed to be dead. For the first time since this façade had started, I wanted her to die completely. It would be far easier to become someone else if she no longer existed.

Liam kissed my brow. "We can spend breakfast together," he said, his tone cajoling in his attempts to soothe my childish tantrum. "That's why I came to wake you."

I bolted upright. "You want to have breakfast with me?"

"Of course, dear. I want to spend as much of the day with you as possible."

"I'll be ready in less than five minutes." I kissed his cheek and scampered towards the wardrobe.

He raised his eyebrow. "You're dressing without your maid?"

I froze halfway from tugging my favorite green gown from its hanger. I was about to change with Liam in the room? What was I thinking? Face enflamed, I spun to face him.

"Shoo! I'm changing."

He chuckled and obediently left with a rakish wink. I dressed as quickly as possible and didn't bother to fix my hair before I stumbled into the sitting room we shared. His smile widened as he took in my unbrushed hair and frazzled appearance, no sign of disapproval of my morning get-up. It endeared him to me all the more.

Although I tried to eat slowly in order to make the meal last, breakfast sped by far too quickly. All too soon Liam frowned at the clock. "I'm afraid I have to leave now."

"No!" I knocked over my juice as I seized his hand. "Please don't leave, Liam."

His brows furrowed. "You normally don't mind my meetings. What makes today different?"

How I ached to tell him but of course I couldn't. My hold tightened around his hand. "Stay with me."

"I'm sorry, Lavena."

Lavena. I hated that name. I yanked my hand away. "Fine," I said briskly. "Have a good time."

He seemed thoroughly perplexed by my moodiness but that didn't dissipate his ever-present kindness that was so *Liam*. He cradled my cheek. "I'll return as soon as

possible. I promise." He kissed my brow, his lips lingering, before he rose and was gone.

I glared at the closed door that he'd disappeared through, biting the inside of my lip to keep myself from crying. After all, I was now nineteen, no longer a child. I shouldn't cry.

I cried anyway.

When my tears dried and my maid fixed the mess that was my appearance, I went in search of something to do. Unfortunately, all three of Liam's sisters had chosen today to come down with a cold, leaving me alone with my miserable thoughts as I wandered the grounds.

Loneliness suffocated me. I wasn't used to being alone on my birthday. Archer's absence felt more acute; we'd never spent our birthday apart.

I plopped down on the lawn on the palace grounds and hugged my knees to my chest, hoping the action would satisfy the ache filling my heart. While I'd managed to bury myself deep for two months now, Anwen felt more alive than ever before, and not only that, she yearned to escape. Hours drifted by, endless and terribly dull hours spent poking and prodding my soul at all the remnants of Anwen that remained.

It was too painful. I wished she'd just die completely.

Just when I thought that my day couldn't get any more miserable, my name drifted across the grounds. No, not my name, *Lavena's*—how scary how accustomed to it I was becoming—but it was spoken in my favorite voice. I spun around, not daring to hope, and stared in wide-eyed disbelief as Liam bounded over and swept me in a tight hug.

I stood rigidly in his arms for a stunned moment before I embarrassing buried myself against him and burst into tears. Liam rubbed my back as he gently rocked me and murmured soothingly.

"What's wrong, Lavena? Why are you so sad today?"

"It doesn't matter." I stared up at him, trying to discern whether or not he was real, afraid that if I looked away for one moment he'd disappear. "What are you doing here? Don't you have important meetings?"

He grinned a bit guiltily. "I do but I have five minutes, time which I naturally want to give to you."

My forehead furrowed. "But why? I don't understand. Surely, your meetings are more important."

"Nothing is more important than you, Lavena."

Despite his sweet sentiment I flinched. How I hated her name. What I wouldn't give to never hear him say it ever again.

"I've been thinking about you all day, which isn't unusual anymore, but you were on my mind more than usual today," he continued. "You seem unusually distressed this morning, so I thought I could..." His face darkened and shyness filled his eyes. "I have something for you."

"You do?" He'd never given me anything before. For a startling moment I wondered if Liam could possibly know it was my birthday. "What is it?"

He lowered his eyes, shifting uncomfortably. "It's nothing much. I pray you're not disappointed." Cheeks pink, he pulled out a single piece of parchment from behind his back and handed it to me.

It was a drawing, admittedly a rather poor one. It appeared to be us sitting in a garden watching the sunset. My heart fluttered. I knew what this picture was about. I raised my eyes to his.

"The last night of our honeymoon?"

He gave me a rather bashful smile. "I often reminisce about all the wonderful moments we've spent together and this one was on my mind today. I hoped that if I drew it for you it'd make you smile." He lit up. "It worked. You're smiling."

It was impossible not to. There were so many things I longed to say. I wished I could express how special this picture was to me, not only my glimmer of sunshine in what had been a rather dismal day but the best birthday present I'd ever received.

I pressed the drawing close to my heart. "Thank you, Liam. I've never loved a drawing more. I'll treasure it always."

His grin broadened. "Is it the drawing or the artist that has you so pleased?"

"All three."

He raised his eyebrow at that.

"It's also the memory depicted, one of my favorites we've spent together."

"Mine too, as is the one I thought of during my slow and agonizing death from boredom." He pulled out two other pieces of parchment that looked much too official to be handled so carelessly. He handed me one. "Shall we make paper boats?"

A thrill rippled over me. "But don't you have to be back at meetings?"

"Probably." He took my hand and led me to the fountain, where we settled. "Race you?"

We both bent over our parchment and rapidly folded our boats. Liam was naturally finished first. With an whoop of triumph he held his up before peering over at my progress.

"Is that all you've managed? Come on, Lavena, you can do it."

A bubble of laughter escaped and I marveled at its presence. What had been a depressing day now felt so much brighter. I could always count on Liam to make me happy. "I can't remember how."

"Then I'll help you." He plucked my pathetic-looking boat that didn't resemble a boat at all from my hands and finished it for me. "There, we shall take them on an adventure the moment I'm free again."

"You promise?"

His gaze seeped into mine. "I promise." He sighed then and I knew our time together had concluded. "I should go. I'm sorry, Lavena."

"It's alright." And somehow now it really was. "Thank you for coming to see me."

He cradled my face, expression so tender. "I always want to be with you. That'll never change."

"No really, Liam." I seized his hand and held it between both of mine, hoping the gesture would somehow convey how much his coming to see me on my birthday, despite him not having the time to do so, meant to me. "Your visit means so much to me, more than you could possibly know. Thank you."

Liam lifted my hand and kissed it. "It was a pleasure, dear."

And the fact he'd used an endearment rather than Princess Lavena's name made the moment all the more sweeter. He bent down and softly kissed me, and even though he needed to leave, he lingered, as if he needed to be with me as much as I needed to be with him, a fact that made the brightest part of my birthday all the more wonderful.