

### \*~Deleted Scene: The State Dinner~\*

My exchange with Prince Nolan left me flustered and confused. I still didn't quite understand his motives for going along with Princess Lavena's charade, not to mention his words concerning Liam had been both beautiful and startling, filling me with both hope and despair that we could really work. I did my best to check my emotions as the prince led me back to my husband, who shifted on the balls of his feet as he waited with restless anticipation.

"I see you survived your interrogation." He winked at Prince Nolan. "As a protective older brother myself, I know how dangerous they can be. Did he drill you for information about how I'm treating you? If so, I hope I passed."

Prince Nolan gave a good-natured chuckle as he relinquished my arm, which Liam immediately claimed with adorable eagerness. I forced a smile, hoping it'd mask my lingering distress from my conversation with Prince Nolan, but Liam knew me too well by now to be fooled. Concern furrowed his brow as he studied my expression.

"Are you alright, darling?"

His fingers brushed against my cheek and I instinctively leaned against his soft touch. Prince Nolan's words filled my mind as I searched Liam's eyes: Liam looked at me as if I was a man losing his heart. Could Liam possibly love me? Perhaps he *thought* he did, but how could he truly when he didn't even know me?

"Lavena?" Liam's concerned tone extracted another smile from me. I rested my hand over his.

"I'm fine."

"I engaged in some shameless spying from the window during your stroll with Nolan," he said. "You seemed rather distressed. Did your visit not go well?"

"I'm merely stressed about the upcoming dinner." My stomach knotted at the thought of entertaining Lycerian dignitaries and diplomats, many of whom likely knew the real Princess Lavena. It was all I could do not to bolt.

Liam grimaced. "Ah yes, the dinner. Because I'm striving to be a better Crown Prince, unfortunately escaping isn't an option. We'll face it together."

He began escorting me from the sitting room towards the dining room. With each step closer my stomach churned. Liam paused outside the doors.

"I know you're shy so this dinner will be difficult for you."

My breath caught. How had Liam known I was shy? That was an Anwen trait, not Princess Lavena's. Once again, he'd caught a glimpse of the real me beneath the mask, the mask I wasn't very good at wearing. This thought sent me in a panic. If I couldn't pretend for Liam, how could I do it for a room of Lycerian nobles?

"Don't be nervous," Liam whispered as the footman opened the doors to the opulent dining room. "I'll be with you the entire time."

He patted my hand curled around his elbow and he led me into the formal dining room. The guests stood for us and Prince Nolan. As Liam escorted me to my seat, I scanned the surrounding faces for any familiar ones but all were strangers; I'd even welcome the presence King and Queen of Draceria, but they weren't in attendance.

I was seated between Prince Nolan and Liam. Liam immediately took my hand beneath the table and his touch helped calm my nerves. As the first course was served, Prince Nolan leaned over to whisper into my ear.

"Please don't look so nervous, Anwen; you'll seem more suspicious."

How could I *not* look nervous? I warily eyed the surrounding nobleman, several whom gave me polite nods of acknowledgment, others whose brows furrowed as they studied me, seeming a bit...confused.

"Considering I won't be acting as if anything is amiss, they have no reason to suspect you're not Lavena," he continued.

Except for my upcoming dismal performance as I tried to pretend I knew how to conduct myself at a formal dinner and engage in political talk with important dignitaries. Prince Nolan seemed to sense my thoughts, for he leaned closer again.

"Not to fear; Lavena may know how to play the part but her duty in conversing with dignitaries has always been lacking. Thus no one should suspect you."

I still wasn't reassured, especially when Prince Nolan pulled away, leaving me at the mercies of one of the stuffy diplomats, who immediately seized the opportunity to address me.

"It's a pleasure to see you looking so well, Your Highness."

I shakily took a sip of mushroom soup, its mouthwatering steam causing my stomach to roil. "And you as well, uh..."

"Sir Gerek," Prince Nolan supplied in an undertone that unfortunately wasn't quiet enough to avoid the nobleman's notice. Although his Sir Gerek's face remained rigid and polite, annoyance flashed in his eyes.

"Oh yes, Sir Gerek," I said with exaggerated sweetness.

"Too sweet, Anwen," Prince Nolan whispered. "Scowl at him and roll your eyes."

I gasped quietly. "You want me to do *what*?"

"It's imperative you behave like my sister; she rarely showed politeness, even to men of rank."

I bit the inside of my lip to suppress a sigh before forcing myself to scowl at the dignitary. Sir Gerek actually relaxed, as if relieved I was behaving how he expected. Prince Nolan snorted, causing him to choke on his soup. I glared at him as he hastily took a sip of water.

"What's so funny?" I hissed.

"Nothing, nothing." He worked to school his expression but laughter still shown in his eyes. Unbelievable. He encouraged me to try and behave like Princess Lavena and then laughed at my attempt. I rolled my eyes, which earned me a pat on the knee from the prince beneath the table.

"Yes, the eye roll was good, but still not terribly convincing. Despite you trying so hard to be mean, you can't seem to manage it. But don't give up: it's better to pretend to be someone unpleasant than to be caught." He pulled away.

Sir Gerek had watched our quiet exchange, his gaze penetrating, as were the gazes of the dignitaries seated around him. One tilted his head, eyes suspicious. "Princess Lavena?" He said her name hesitantly, whether because he didn't believe it should apply to me or he because doubted his own doubts that it did.

"What do you want?" I snapped as venomously as I could, all while my heart pounded in nerves. He flinched and flushed.

"Forgive me, Your Highness, I was just...forgive me."

I rolled my eyes, hating myself for it, but a sideways glance at Prince Nolan showed his approval for my performance. Since I was already making a fool of myself, I flipped my hair in the way I'd always seen the princess do and sipped my soup through pursed lips with as cold and aloof expression as I could muster.

Liam shifted uneasily beside me and I froze. I'd forgotten he was witness to my Princess Lavena role. My cheeks darkened and I cast him an uncertain glance. He looked at me with bewilderment and confusion. I squeezed my eyes shut, wanting to sink through the floor. Why had Liam been forced to witness me at my worst? I hated pretending with him most of all.

"Prince Liam?" Sir Gerek's address tore Liam's attention away from me. He blinked at the diplomat, seeming dazed, before he flashed his usual charming prince smile, but I knew him well enough to see it was forced.

"Yes?"

"I must congratulate you on your recent marriage to our charming princess." While his features remained polite, his overly tight smile was mocking. Liam seemed to sense this too and a protective look filled his eyes as he wrapped his arm around me, as if claiming me.

"Thank you for your kind words. I'm pleased to say our union is going very well."

Sir Gerek's eyes widened in obvious surprise. "And does Her Highness agree?" He turned his questioning look towards me.

I wouldn't pretend to be anything less than devoted to my Liam. I beamed up at him and was satisfied to see his wariness soften as his own tender look met mine. "Certainly. Liam is wonderful."

Prince Nolan cleared his throat warningly and too late I realized perhaps I'd steered from the Princess-Lavena script a bit too much. "Their match is a great benefit to both Lyceria and Draceria," he said in his stuffy prince tone. "The trade agreements alone benefit the economy tremendously."

He launched into a dull outline of all the said benefits that thoroughly engaged the surrounding diplomats, leaving me to my anxious-riddled thoughts. All these benefits would crumble as soon as it was discovered I was an imposter. With the way he talked about the political alignment, surely His Highness realized that. Why then was he disregarding that fact and allowing Princess Lavena's scheme to continue?

Liam wiped his mouth to disguise his bored yawn before beginning to play with my fingers beneath the table. I relaxed at his familiar gesture, grateful my performance as the princess hadn't been too off putting to him. He eventually used the opportunity our guests were distracted with Prince Nolan's monologue to whisper in my ear.

"Are you alright, Lavena?"

I managed a nod, even though it was a lie, a lie I fought to continue as I tried to behave as if I was alright. I feigned interest as the conversation over the next two courses continued to revolve around the alliance and benefits of the marriage between Princess Lavena and Crown Prince Liam before the topic steered in a more troublesome direction.

“Lavena will make an excellent queen,” Liam said, practically bursting with husband pride. “At her arrangement, we’ve conducted regular tours to some of the poorer areas of the kingdom, not to mention she encourages me in my duties.”

The dignitaries’ eyes widened in obvious shock before they managed to hide their reaction. “Is that so, Your Highness?” Sir Gerek asked. “Their Majesties will be pleased that your past indifference has been overcome.”

“I’m using my marriage as an opportunity to improve my past failings so I can be better prepared for my future responsibilities,” I said. By the confused look on the advisors’ faces and the way Prince Nolan tried to school his expression, my performance was slipping again. I fought back a sigh and rubbed my temples, where the beginnings of a headache pulsed. This was exhausting.

Another course began as plates of roast and potatoes were placed in front of us. I picked at my food as the conversation shifted again to something also dull and way beyond my inexperienced comprehension, only speaking to answer the questions posed to me.

I quickly began feeling tense and drained, which caused my mask to falter, earning me several bewildered and suspicious looks from the noblemen whose names I’d already forgotten—except for the nosy Sir Gerek, who took another opportunity to question me as we washed our hands in the finger bowls in preparation for the final course.

“If you forgive my saying so, Your Highness, but you’ve seemed...different tonight.”

“Is that a problem?” I managed weakly, tired of the game and wanting nothing more to escape the table.

“I only point it out because I’m concerned. I hope you can alleviate them, so should Their Majesties ask, I can inform them that their daughter is well.”

“While your concern for the princess’s health is admirable,” Prince Nolan said coolly. “I’ll be the one to inform Their Majesties that Lavena is quite well. She’s merely exhausted tonight.”

Sir Gerek bowed humbly to acknowledge his mistake, but that didn’t keep him or the others from continuing to assess me closely. I ached to leave their scrutiny.

The endless dinner finally concluded. I rose first, eager to finally make my escape. Liam immediately took my arm. “It was a pleasure to dine with you,” he told our

guests. "If you're excuse me, I need to escort Her Highness back to her room before joining you in the parlor for additional discussion."

Oh no, that meant I wasn't supposed to leave yet. "But Liam—"

"It's alright, Lavena," he murmured as we left the dining room. "You're clearly unwell. Propriety or not, I won't be at ease unless you rest." He paused outside the door to frown back at the dignitaries we'd eaten with, still watching us with suspicion. "They sure were behaving strangely around you, as if something about you puzzled them. I wonder why?"

I knew exactly why. Their eyes were giving them too different messages: while I *looked* like the princess, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't convincingly *act* like her. Further proof that despite getting away with this façade this long, it would eventually crack, and then everything would fall apart.