

This mild fight scene was originally woven through the paper boats scene that remained in the final version.

~Deleted Scene: Thwarted Progress~

When I arrived for breakfast the next morning, I found a daisy resting beside my plate. I grinned girlishly as I picked it up and breathed in its floral scent. *Liam...*

He'd been doing simple, sweet gestures for me every day this week, ever since our garden stroll where we'd first held hands. Small tokens, really, but all of which felt monumental to me—from asking the cook to prepare blueberry pudding as a surprise, to leaving hidden notes for me to discover, and now flowers. If this was Liam courting, he was doing a remarkable job of it.

I didn't hear him come in but I sensed his presence after he'd approached. He leaned over my chair and I became enveloped in his cinnamon scent. "Good morning, Lavena."

I shuddered as his warm breath caressed my skin. "Good morning, Liam."

He twisted around to playfully rub his nose against mine. I clutched the arms of my chair in an attempt to ground myself. Goodness, he was getting more forward; as much as I loved it, I couldn't continue to allow this to happen between us.

I'd spent most of the night reliving yesterday's excursion to the village in every detail, dwelling on each look, smile, and tender word Liam had given me. Each reminder caused my heart to flutter in a way that was foreign but which I recognized all the same—it was the early signs of falling in love, I was sure of it. And falling in love was something I couldn't do.

By the time morning had dawned, I knew my heart was in serious jeopardy. I needed to better guard it before Liam stole any more of it. Which meant I'd have to pull away. But how could I do that when there wasn't anything I wanted more than Liam?

Oblivious to the battle raging within me, Liam smiled warmly. "It is a wonderful morning, isn't it?" He withdrew and walked stiffly over to his seat, wincing as he went. "I wasn't sure I'd be able to get out of bed this morning, considering yesterday I used muscles I didn't even know I had. My princely stride has been replaced with the waddle of a goose."

"It's a good thing I like geese so much." The words escaped before I could check them. Already trying to resist my affections for Liam was proving difficult.

He grinned as he plopped into his chair and turned his soft gaze to me. "You look lovely today, just as you did yesterday with your soot-covered dress and messed-up hair. You were amazing with the villagers."

It was another shift in our relationship: frequent compliments, given to me shyly at first—and many in a fumbling manner—but all with a sweet sincerity that made me blush. On cue, my cheeks warmed now. "Thank you. And you were never more a crown prince than when you were working with the men to rebuild the cottage." I lifted the daisy to my nose again. "Thank you for the flower; I love daisies."

"Is that a daisy, then?" He slumped in relief at my nod. "Thank goodness. You've frequently noticed a specific white flower during our daily walks, but this morning when I rose early to track one down for you, I realized just how many white flowers there were and was afraid I'd plucked the wrong one."

"Even if you had, the gesture would have been equally appreciated." Achingly sweet, just like everything about him. Regardless of what happened between us, I felt quite fortunate to have the opportunity of knowing this wonderful man.

Conversation flowed easily as we began breakfast. Liam was his usual animated self, laughing boisterously as he talked with his hands while occasionally grimacing as his stiff body moved. His laughter washed over me and each tender smile sent a flutter straight to my heart.

Liam shoved his last bit of toast into his mouth and leaned back in his seat. "What are your plans for today, dear?"

Dear... he'd been using that endearment more and more often, and it never ceased to make me smile. "Is there a reason for your curiosity?"

Crimson dotted his cheeks as he ran his fingernail along the table seam. "I was hoping you'd want to spend the day with me."

He made the same request every morning, always with shy uncertainty, as if afraid I wouldn't want to. But how could I not when being in his presence, with his boundless enthusiasm, was like basking in the sun?

Wait, no, I couldn't think that, nor could I spend the day with him like I had yesterday. I needed to follow through with my earlier decision and begin maintaining

my distance. I swallowed the acceptance I ached to give to his invitation. "I'm sorry, not today."

His eyes widened, and the light that usually filled them dimmed. "Why not?"

"I have another activity in mind to occupy my time." My words came out wrong and I flinched. By the guarded look that settled over Liam, I realized they'd been as harsh as I'd feared.

"This is the same excuse you always gave me whenever you wanted to avoid our dutiful courtship outings before our marriage. After these past several weeks, especially yesterday, I'd thought..." His expression crumpled. "But I was clearly mistaken."

Oh no. "Wait, Liam, it's not—"

But he'd already pushed himself from the table, his hardened mask that he'd worn the first week of our honeymoon returning, a mask I now realized served as his protection. I was hurting him. The thought was agonizing.

"There's no need to explain. I understand perfectly." He turned his back on me and headed for the door. I leapt to my feet.

"Please don't do this, Liam. If you leave now, whatever hurt I've inadvertently caused will only grow worse. I can't bear that thought. Please stay and allow us to work through this together."

He paused in the doorway, head slumped, before slowly turning back around to stare at me, his expression no longer angry, but vulnerable. After a moment he nodded and returned to his seat. I settled back in my own with a sigh. "Now talk to me. What is it about my taking a morning to myself that bothers you?"

He didn't respond at first. Instead, he seemed preoccupied with playing with his food, building a structure with his sausages.

"I don't begrudge your wanting some time to yourself, especially since we've spent quite a lot of time together. It's just...when you used the exact phrase you used to give before our marriage when you wanted to avoid me, I feared you were playing the same cruel games we used to play that I'd hoped were finally behind us." He finally looked up, his gaze glassy with his pain. "Is this another game, Lavena?"

"It's never been a game," I whispered.

"You can't say that, not when it used to be."

Remorse tightened my heart. "Do the memories from before our marriage still hurt you?"

"Yes," he said. "Though the pain has been fading since you've done nothing to reopen old wounds...until now. So after your comment...I guess I got scared that we'd lost everything we'd gained on our honeymoon. Can you understand that?"

Yes, I could understand, only this time I couldn't blame Princess Lavena, not when it had been *me* that had inadvertently caused our contention. My heart tightened. No matter how close we became, Liam would forever be scarred by his memories with Princess Lavena, a fact made more unbearable because he thought these painful memories had been caused by *me*.

No wonder he'd reacted so strongly at my attempts to maintain distance. I ached to erase his pain. Even if risking my heart would hurt me more deeply in the end, I'd gladly pay that price for Liam.

When I'd been silent too long, his guarded expression faltered. "Lavena?"

I sighed. How I hated her name. "I'm truly sorry, Liam. I didn't consider how my desire for a morning to myself would affect you. Please forgive me."

Whatever resentment that might have lingered in his eyes faded in an instant. "Thank you for your apology. I'm sorry too, for overreacting. I was just afraid of losing everything...of losing *you*."

"You won't." No matter what happened. Even when the princess eventually returned, I'd always care for him.

He managed a soft smile. "Then everything is alright again."

I gaped at him "Is it?"

"It will be. I suppose we can't expect complete healing from our painful past to happen overnight. A setback is to be expected once in a while, but it can't destroy everything we've built so far."

I stared at him in wonder. He was forgiving me. Despite my continued attempts to guard my heart, his forgiveness had only caused me to find yet another reason to care for Liam.

Princess Lavena was a fool for not wanting him...just as I was a fool for wanting him too much. But I was determined to try and enjoy every moment we had together, even with knowing our relationship couldn't last.

Liam's look became rather shy but hopeful. "Would you like to spend the morning with me or do you still want some time alone?"

"I'd like nothing better than to spend more time with my husband."

He brightened. "Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Then we shan't waste another moment." He bounded from his seat with his usual exuberance and took my hands to tug me to my feet.

"Can't I finish breakfast first?" I asked.

"Ah yes, provisions." He picked up my napkin and dumped the entire basket of fruit inside. "Now we're ready."

I grabbed my last piece of toast and allowed him to lead me from the dining room. "What adventure do you have in mind for today?"

It turned out to be a trip to the fountain. Liam sent a servant to retrieve a small stack of rather important-looking documents before taking one with a reverence that I doubted was for its content.

"Have you ever folded a paper boat? Why are you shaking your head? This is blasphemy, Lavena."

I dipped my hand into the cool fountain and splashed him. "I've always been too busy to fold paper boats."

He arched an eyebrow. "Busy doing what? You're not the heir."

Oops. I silently cursed my mistake. While the handmaiden Anwen worked from dawn until dusk, Princess Lavena was one of the most idle people I knew. "I don't like being idle."

"It's true you never sit still for long...like me. Another compatibility." His grin was hesitant at first, as if he was still unsure whether our contention from this morning was really behind us, but at my returning smile he brightened. "Now, shall I remedy this appalling lapse in your education? The art of making paper boats is far more important than any princess subjects you've studied. Kian and I spent many hours perfecting the process when we were children." He winked and I giggled. He handed me one of the documents. "Now, watch closely..."

"Wait, Liam, we're using *this*? Isn't it important?"

He took it and studied it with a furrowed brow before shrugging. "Not really." He returned it, his touch lingering on mine. "Now watch the master."

He set his document on the rim of the fountain, pulled up his sleeves, and went to work, his tongue half-sticking out of his mouth as he made each fold with practiced

precision. I watched, fascinated, as the boat took shape. He finished and held it up triumphantly.

"I dub this ship the *HMS Lavena*. May she sail the seas and experience grand adventures for many years."

I winced to hear *her* name used in place of mine. "I hope I don't sink; I have no experience captaining such a seaworthy vessel."

"As your first mate, I'd never let you perish in a shipwreck." He placed the boat in the fountain and gave it a gentle push. Sure enough, it floated. He wriggled his eyebrows. "I'm ready for my accolades."

"Oh Master Shipbuilder, please teach your humble apprentice all your secrets."

He stroked my cheek with his knuckles. "I thought you'd never ask."

He sat next to me, whispering instructions as if he were imparting great shipbuilding secrets. At first he seemed to be deliberately avoiding touching me, as if afraid I'd reject his advances. But as the warmth between us grew, he became braver, and soon found any excuse to touch me, lightly and hesitantly at first, and then more confidently—from brushing my dark hair aside so I could better see, to guiding my hand, to helping me make each fold. I cherished each touch—symbols of his affection and forgiveness—and soon found myself doing poorly on purpose.

"I know what you're up to," he whispered in my ear in a singsong voice.

Heat tickled my cheeks. "I—" I had no words.

He chuckled. "I see I've rendered you speechless." He hesitated before running his fingers through my hair, and even though I was determinedly avoiding his eyes, I still sensed his soft smile. "I don't mind, *Lavena* dear. Too bad we've almost completed this boat's construction. Perhaps the ship will sink so we're forced to start over."

The heat filling my cheeks deepened. "But then the *SS Liam* won't be able to go on its own adventure."

"Perhaps the *SS Liam* likes this one better." He playfully tapped my nose. "Despite that, I do want to accompany the *HMS Lavena* on her own voyage."

We returned to constructing his boat, and after more touching and giggling between us, the *SS Liam* was at last ready to launch. I placed it in the fountain, where it immediately capsized. "My apologies, Captain, but your boat is sinking."

Liam watched the ship slip beneath the water before sighing. "I sank. It appears I distracted you a bit too much. Thus ends the days of the *SS Liam*." He placed his hand over his heart and bowed his head solemnly.

"Not to worry, I'd never leave my husband to such a fate. The *HMS An—Lavena* rescued you before you could perish. Perhaps you can repay my generosity with a grand adventure."

He stroked his chin before a rather wicked grin filled his face. "I have the perfect one in mind."

My heart hammered, but not in fear. "I recognize that mischievous gleam. What plot have you just concocted?"

He slowly leaned forward. "This." He pushed me, sending me tumbling backwards into the fountain with an icy splash. My shriek was eclipsed by his boisterous laugh. I spat out some water and gaped at him through my dripping hair.

"You *pushed* me?"

"Not a very husbandly thing to do, is it? I'm sorry, my dear, but you did sink my ship." He laughed again.

I pushed aside my wet hair. "It appears I mistook you for a gentleman."

He bowed slightly. "I *am* a gentleman and will thus render my assistance immediately." He extended his hand to help me out, but instead I yanked him into the water with a spectacular splash. Sputtering, he scrambled to his knees and gaped at me in shock before he grinned.

"I probably deserved that."

"No doubt, but I'll still apologize." I leaned over and pressed a kiss on his cheek, finally acting on the impulse I'd felt for days. So much for distance.

He stilled, and for a moment he stared at me blankly before his smile widened. "Wow, I like your apologies."

I smiled shyly. "Does this mean you accept it?"

"I certainly do. In fact, I may need another apology as I think I bumped my knee when I fell in." He tilted his cheek towards me expectantly, but instead I splashed him. He chuckled. "I deserved that, too. Now, allow me to do my husbandly duty and warm you up." He pulled me against his wet chest and rubbed his hands up and down my arms. "Pushing you was beyond the lines of my usual immaturity. Are you alright?" His gaze softened in remorse.

"I'm fine. If holding me is your way of saying sorry, then I accept your apology."

I shyly snuggled deeper into his toasty embrace, telling myself I was only doing so because he was a welcome respite from the cold water soaking my skirts.

How strange it was to be enfolded in his arms after fearing this morning I'd broken everything between us. An excursion to fold paper boats had turned into something so much more—it had healed our earlier tension, just as the rest of our honeymoon had been healing Liam from his painful past with Princess Lavena.

I found my fingers stroking the nape of his neck. His breath hooked and he started to lean closer...until my shiver shattered the spell.

"Are you cold?" he whispered.

"No," I lied.

"We should go back inside and get into some warm clothes."

"I don't want to." The water rippled as I nestled closer, not wanting to end this moment with him.

"I don't want you catching a chill. But don't worry, today's adventures aren't over." He helped me out of the fountain.