

~Deleted Scene: Visit with Rhea's Parents~

Halfway to my own bedroom, Mother and Father appeared at the end of the corridor. "Are you here to see Liam?" I asked. "Because he's currently resting. Anwen is with him now."

Mother slumped in disappointment. "I was hoping we'd be able to visit him."

"We'll return this afternoon." Father patted her hand before turning to me. "I'm glad we encountered you. We want to speak with you."

Foreboding knotted my stomach. I wasn't up for this, not so soon after my somber visit with Liam. "About what?"

Father motioned I should follow them. They led me to their sitting room just down the hall, where we settled in front of the fire roaring in the hearth. "We want to know how your courtship is going."

I nearly groaned. First Liam, and now them. Why was everyone so overly concerned about the decision I'd already made? "It's going fine."

Mother frowned. "Forgive us, but it doesn't seem like it is. That's what we want to discuss. Even after two weeks, you two have scarcely spent any time together; you're still practically strangers."

Because he doesn't want to get to know me, not really; he's just going through the motions. The feeling was mutual, considering I wasn't too eager to get to know him. What if the more I discovered about him, the more I'd be tempted to change my mind?

"It's going well," I lied.

"You don't need to pretend, dear; we can tell your heart isn't in it."

Which meant I'd done a terrible job pretending all was going well, but it had been more difficult considering my frequent spending time with Drake made it difficult to maintain the mask hiding my true feelings.

Well, then I'd just have to put it more firmly in place. "I'll do better at making it work."

"There's no need to force it," Mother said gently. "We're grateful you understand the union's benefits and are making an effort, but we're sincere in that we value your happiness far more. We'll simply inform the queen and Briar that—"

"No!" Terror filled my breast at the thought that they were going to back out. I simply *couldn't* lose this match. I wasn't strong enough to endure another failed

relationship; I'd barely survived the first one. "I'm quite fond of Briar," I lied. "It may be going slowly, but it's going well. I want to keep the arrangement."

My parents frowned, looking unconvinced. I straightened and did my best to appear sincere. *Maintain your façade.*

Mother finally sighed. "Very well."

I nearly slumped in my relief.

Father leaned forward. "The Queen of Malvagarria is pressuring us to make the alliance now, but while you've assured us you're interested in the match, we'll inform her we need more time so we can be sure this is what you really want."

"I understand. Thank you."