

~Liam's Perspective: After the Discovery~

I stared unseeing at the wall as my mind swirled, still trying to process the startling revelation that had shattered my world. *The woman I fell in love with is an imposter. She's not really Lavena, nor is she my wife.*

Even now, hours later, sharp disbelief still seeped over me. Only this morning I'd awoken to my dear wife curled up against my side, asleep, one of many perfect moments with the woman who meant everything to me, only for her to be torn from me now.

It had happened so suddenly. A footman had announced that a lookalike to Princess Lavena had arrived and the real one was shown in, one who looked uncannily similar to my wife except for her hardened, disdainful expression, a look I'd seen all too often before my marriage. My heart had pounded in trepidation, as if it knew it was about to lose the one it cared for most.

She'd wasted no time in pointing to the woman I loved with a hateful sneer. "That girl is an imposter."

My chest tightened. *No, it can't be true.* But it had been. How could five simple words destroy everything I held dear? From there everything had unraveled quickly, a nightmare I couldn't escape, no matter how desperate I was to: my wife wasn't really Lavena, but her handmaiden, Anwen.

Anwen... From the moment I'd heard it, her real name had seeped into my heart to nestle with all the feelings between us and the memories we'd created together. And suddenly everything made sense—why this wonderful woman was so different from the Lavena I'd known before, how I'd been able to fall in love with her so effortlessly, why I loved her now. She'd stolen my heart and I never wanted it back.

But now she was gone, and I was left behind, already missing her even though it had only been hours since our separation, a separation that would be permanent if I didn't find a way for us to be together. And I *had* to. I couldn't live without Anwen now that I'd found her.

I sat in the parlor awaiting the arrival of the King and Queen of Lyceria. My family sat nearby, watching me with concern, while Lavena gloated. It was as if Anwen had donned a costume and was playing her part all wrong. I tried not to torture myself by looking at her; she looked too much like Anwen. I could see why I'd initially been

fooled, but now that I had Anwen's features memorized, I'd never be fooled ever again, especially considering no one—especially not Lavena—could be as sweet and wonderful as the woman I'd fallen in love with.

Once more I sensed the concerned gazes of my family. Mother and Father had already spoken to me earlier, offering their condolences for this cruel turn of events and their promises to support my desires to not only break the contract between Lavena and me, but to allow me to marry Anwen. I was grateful for their support, but would it be enough? Would the King and Queen of Lyceria show mercy and break the contract between me and their horrible daughter, the arrangement I loathed now more than ever? By the sinking, foreboding feeling in my stomach, I knew that they wouldn't.

Even if they don't, you'll find a way to be with Anwen. You must, no matter what it takes. I feared it'd take a miracle.

I nearly groaned when Rhea and Elodie joined me on the settee. I wasn't in the mood for sympathy from my well meaning sisters. Didn't they realize I wanted to drown in my misery alone? Perhaps I should have taken refuge in the secret passageways.

"How are you doing?" Rhea asked quietly. I gave her a solemn expression, my answer. She rested her hand on my arm, her face filled with sympathy. "I can see how hard this is for you."

That was an understatement. I glared at Lavena, watching us with a gloating expression that twisted my stomach. It was a similar look she always wore whenever she won one of our antagonistic games we always played. I'd never hated that look more than I did now.

Elodie noticed the look too and scowled. "I still can't believe it. To think that she and the handmaiden switched places, that Lavena really was—"

"Don't call her that," I whispered. "Please. Her name is Anwen."

Elodie covered my hand with her own. "You love her, don't you?"

I balled my hands into fists, digging my nails into my palms, as if the gesture could dissipate the pain that had been tormenting me ever since Anwen had left. "More than anything." I was silent a moment. "I already miss her."

"Well of course you do," Rhea said. "What's worse, you're left with the real Lavena, who's being quite..." She frowned, searching for the right word.

Elodie tapped her lips with her forefinger. "Annoying doesn't quite summarize all she is, does it?"

My lips twitched but I didn't smile; I couldn't. "No, but it's certainly a start." I leaned back with a sigh. "She and Anwen are nothing alike, are they? How could I have ever thought Anwen was someone so horrible?" It was blasphemy of the worst kind.

"Because the entire idea that Lavena has a lookalike servant is too fantastic to believe. The fact that she does"—Elodie's eyes became starry—"it must be destiny."

If destiny wanted us together, why hadn't I found the loophole to my engagement contract? I hadn't in all the years since inheriting Kian's fiancée. Could I really discover one now? Or was I about to embark on an impossible quest?

My sisters spent a few minutes more conversing, but when I didn't participate, they finally took the hint I wanted to be alone and left. Nolan joined me only a minute later, having just finished talking to Lavena; from what I could tell, he'd been scolding her, a scolding she appeared to have completely ignored. Unsurprising.

"How did your conversation go with your horrible sister?" I asked. His solemn expression confirmed my suspicions—it hadn't gone well at all. "I take it you're not about to give me good news. Let me guess—Lavena isn't inclined to retract her desires for making my life miserable through a union between us."

Nolan sighed. "I'm afraid not."

Of course not. She'd spent years making my life miserable and clearly saw no reason to stop now. She watched us with a cold, twisting smirk. I glared at her. "I have no idea what Kian saw in her." For someone who'd been quite intelligent, his affections had been a huge lapse in judgement.

"She was different when Kian was alive," Nolan said.

"If he could see her now, he'd be rolling in his grave." He and Lavena had always had an unusual relationship. Their feelings for one another had been quiet, subtle. For years I'd wondered whether Kian had been happy or indifferent about his arrangement...until one day I'd stumbled upon them in a moment alone. I would never forget the soft way he'd looked at Lavena and the tender way she'd looked at him in return—nor the broken way she'd sobbed when he'd died.

That had been the last day she'd seemed human. The day after Kian was buried, she'd become a cold monster. If Kian had seen her like that, he couldn't possibly still love her. And I definitely didn't care for her. But my initial hatred had now deepened.

"I can't marry her," I said. "When I thought I was married to her and she behaved differently, I tried making it work. But it's too late to try with the real Lavena. I'm in love with Anwen, and now I can't be with anyone but her."

Nolan smiled wryly. "You and Lavena are more alike than you think."

"I'm nothing like—"

"Please let me finish." Nolan leaned back with a sigh, his gaze still on his sister. "Kian and Lavena didn't love one another right away, but they tried to make their arrangement work. And it did...until he died. Now Lavena can't bear the thought of being with anyone else, the same way you feel now that you've fallen in love with Anwen." He frowned. "Perhaps it was a mistake I didn't expose her the moment I realized she'd taken Lavena's place. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," I said. "I'd never give up the opportunity to know Anwen." My jaw tightened as I glanced at Lavena, still glaring at me with her icy hatred. "She truly loved Kian, didn't she?" It was hard to fathom the cold woman before me could have ever experienced such a warm, tender emotion such as love.

"I believe so. If I'm not mistaken, that's why she hates you so fiercely. Because you're not him, yet you've taken his place."

"It's not my fault he died. I never wanted this."

"I know. But that doesn't change your circumstances."

He was right: nothing had changed. She clearly still hated me. It made her fighting for our arrangement make little sense. "Why does she suddenly want our union she's always despised?"

Nolan shrugged. "I don't pretend to understand my sister. We've never been close, but we're even less so ever since she changed after Kian's death. But I suspect she's spent years trying to fill the emptiness he left behind, and has now given up. Perhaps she's claiming the one thing that she thinks can give her life some meaning: the Dracerian crown."

"Even if it comes with me?" I asked wryly. He nodded. We were silent a moment before I asked the question that had been weighing on my mind. "You mentioned earlier that you noticed the switch at the reception. Why didn't you say anything? You clearly understand the benefits of my marriage to your sister."

"I'm not sure." His brow furrowed as he considered his answer. "There were many things going through my mind at the time—protecting Anwen, protecting the image of

my family, and...protecting you. You and Lavena would never work, but when I saw you and Anwen together...I thought you deserved a chance at happiness." His cheeks darkened as he turned towards the window. "Perhaps I thought that if you succeeded in winning a seemingly impossible happy match for yourself, I'd have hope in my own romantic endeavors."

I frowned. Was Nolan in love with a woman he couldn't be with? Interesting. I wanted to press him for further details, but before I could, a footman entered, announcing the arrival of the King and Queen of Lyceria. I stood; it was time to face the dragon.

"Will they listen?" I asked Nolan, whose somber attention was fixated on the door, awaiting his parents' entrance.

He bit his lip. "I doubt it, which means you have a long, arduous battle ahead of you."

I braced myself for what promised to be a heated confrontation, one I had to win at all costs, for I couldn't accept any future without dear Anwen.

As predicted, the meeting hadn't gone well at all. The King and Queen of Lyceria's shock at Lavena's confession had quickly escalated into anger—towards her for coming up with the scheme, Nolan for going along with it, Anwen for lying to them when they'd visited yesterday—despite that not being her fault—and then me and my parents for insisting we break the contract. Naturally, the king and queen had refused our request.

The heated arguments had gone on for several hours before we were finally granted a respite in a late and tense dinner, a meal where Lavena made it her goal to torment me, something, as always, she seemed to take secret delight in. With each of her sinister looks and cruel remarks, my hand tightened on my butter knife, the only release for the hatred festering within me. This was torture. Could I endure this before I went mad?

Midst her chatter, Lavena kept casting me ever-widening smirks, as if despite my attempts to remain indifferent, she knew she was getting to me. As the endless meal extended, my family's polite masks faltered, and they stared at Lavena as if they'd never seen her before. Now they finally knew who she truly was—the vile woman I'd been forced to endure for seven years, the one who'd previously worn a mask whenever with them. She was, if possible, even worse than before, whether it was because she now

held nothing back or because her horrible personality was magnified compared to that of my Anwen.

Dessert was finally served, the final obstacle between me and my much-needed escape from what had easily been the worst day of my life. As a footman served Lavena, she fluttered her eyes flirtatiously, causing him to startle and nearly drop the princess's berry crumble.

I couldn't remain silent any longer. I addressed the flustered footman. "I feel obligated to point out that the wonderful woman who's been here for the past two months and the woman before you now are two entirely different people."

The footman cast me a puzzled glance. "Is that so, Your Highness?"

"Indeed. This woman is not one I recommend getting yourself involved with, no matter how flirtatious she appears."

"Of course, Your Highness." His cheeks darkened as he swept into a bow. I hoped he and the rest of the male servants had enough sense to stay far away from Lavena.

She gave me an exaggerated pout. "Way to ruin my fun."

"I won't have you tainting Anwen's image."

Her eyes narrowed. "Protective of her, are you? And why would a prince care one whit about a pathetic little goose girl?" She gave me a coy smile as she swirled her wine in her glass, clearly already knowing the answer but wanting to hear me say it all the same.

"Because she's Draceria's future queen. I won't have your vile habits taint her."

She laughed coldly. "It's too late for that; her lower birth already makes her inferior."

I shook the table as I shot to my feet, but before I could put her in her place, Father firmly yanked me back down. "Calm yourself," he said sternly.

Triumph glistened in Lavena's eyes at another successful battle won, and in her typical fashion, she would now relish her victory. She sneered. "You can't truly care for her, not when you don't really know her. You've only seen her playing the part of a princess, but if you knew who she really is, you wouldn't give her a single glance. She's nothing more than a poor, pathetic, dirty—"

Her words only stoked my anger. The cutlery shook as I slammed my hands on the table. "Don't talk about Anwen that way."

She rolled her eyes. "How can you defend a woman you scarcely know?"

"I've spent two months with her," I said. "I know her. She could never accurately portray you; she's too innately sweet." Which had made it effortless to begin falling for her from the very first moment.

Lavena laughed coldly. "You're the most ridiculous man I've ever met."

"Watch your tongue," the Queen of Lyceria hissed.

Lavena naturally ignored her mother. "It's my duty to tell you what that handmaiden is really like so you can let go of your pathetic infatuation. The day I found her, she was dirty, thin, bare-footed, and wearing a patched dress. Isn't that distasteful?"

My heart wrenched at this new revelation—Anwen was *poor*. I hadn't even considered such a scenario. How I wanted to act as her gallant knight and rescue her so I could cherish her forever.

"Furthermore, I found her sketching a *bug*," Lavena continued. "She actually likes the creepy crawlies." By her expression, she clearly thought this fact alone was enough for me to stop caring for her.

"I already knew that," I said as I sipped from my goblet.

Lavena's eyes widened. "But how? She couldn't have shared that with you, not while under the contract of the ring."

"I told you that she was terrible at playing you," I said. "She tried, but she couldn't completely hide herself."

For a moment I hoped I'd won this round, but I should have known Lavena better than that. "But do you know the extent of her weird obsession? She spends every spare moment reading about the creatures or hunting them, has notebooks filled with sketches and observations, and even has collections of dead bugs she's mounted and labeled." She wrinkled her nose.

I stared in surprise. What I'd assumed was a mild interest was so much more. How had I not known all this? There was still so much I needed to learn about Anwen. I hated how her unwanted absence made it impossible for me to quench my burning curiosity.

"Fascinating," I murmured. "I wonder how she first became interested in such a unique hobby?" It made her even more endearing. I ached to ask her for further details, to have her show me these collections, and to write her so that I could discover about her other hobbies. I wanted to know *everything*.

"It's not *fascinating*," Lavena scoffed. "I almost sacked her on multiple occasions because of her unnatural interest. A week before the wedding, she caught a

grasshopper so that she could measure the length of its jumps, only for it to escape her room to enter *mine*." She shuddered. "We never could find it."

I tipped my head back and laughed. "Don't keep me in suspense. What conclusions did she come up with?"

"You'll never know considering you'll never see her again."

My humor vanished instantly and I tightened my jaw. I refused to allow *that*.

Lavena must have sensed her words had had little effect on my determination, for she continued; would my foe never give up? "You do realize she's just a goose girl, don't you?"

"What do goose girls do, exactly?" I'd never paid attention to such an occupation and cursed my ignorance now. It was one of infinite things I wanted to discover about Anwen.

"Tend the geese," Elodie said. "We have one serving at the palace."

I stared at her blankly. "We do?"

"Yes." She scrunched her forehead. "I think their only role is to watch the geese. It sounds rather boring."

"And to think that peasant actually *liked* such a simple life." Lavena gave me a nasty smirk. "You do realize what that means, don't you? She'd never be happy in any life you have to offer her."

My heart sank. She was right. Anwen had already been forced to be part of my world against her will. How could I ask her to give up the simple life she loved just for *me*?

I did my best to ignore Lavena for the remainder of the final course. By her taunting smirks, she knew she'd won another round of our hateful game. The moment dessert concluded, I leapt to my feet so I could retreat to my room and lock myself away from my ogre. I'd only taken a single step when Father rested a firm hand on my shoulder, stopping me.

"We need to speak with you."

Now? I sighed and obediently followed him and Mother from the dining room. They didn't speak until we were safely behind the closed door of their sitting room.

Mother turned to me, her eyes filled with tears. "Please don't tell me Lavena has always behaved so abhorrently."

I collapsed in an armchair with a weary groan. "She has. She pretended around everyone but me, but now she's holding nothing back. Perhaps because she realizes she's won the war."

My parents gaped at me in disbelief before Mother slowly shook her head. "That can't be true."

"It is." I rubbed my temples, hoping to dislodge the constant headache that always came from Lavena, but it was nothing to the ache I was already experiencing in my heart.

"But...she's *horrible!*"

"I told you as much," I said. "I told you she's a vile brat and that I loathe her, but you thought I was just not being dutiful enough towards our stupid contract."

My parents continued to stare at me in disbelief. "But with Kian, she—"

"Whatever decency she possessed when he was alive died with him," I said. "I've never wanted to be shackled to her. I tried everything I could to avoid such a fate. But I had no choice but to do my duty. Then, to my astonishment, the horrible Lavena suddenly transformed into the most remarkable woman—one incredibly sweet, kind, gentle...I couldn't help but fall in love with her." My heart constricted. "I thought a miracle had occurred. I didn't question the reason for Lavena's change of heart, only embraced it. Now I've discovered that Lavena hasn't changed at all—it hadn't even been her. And now I've lost the woman that means more to me than anything else."

My voice broke and my fists tightened as I fought to suppress my bitter emotions. Mother knelt in front of me and pulled me into a hug. "I'm so sorry, Liam," she whispered. "I wish we'd known."

"Well we know now," Father said fiercely. "That woman is vile. She will not marry into our family."

"But the contract," Mother said, sounding so helpless. "Whatever are we to do?"

"I'm not sure," Father said. "But we'll do something."

"Please," I pleaded. "Don't make me marry that woman. I want only Anwen. It'll be torture to have not her, but instead a poor imitation of her."

"I know dear, we'll try." Mother caressed my hair the way she used to when I was a boy. "But before we begin trying to find a loophole, there's something we must find out first so we fully understand the situation we now face because of that unexpected

switch." She cupped my chin to raise my gaze to her worry filled one. "Is Anwen"—she took a wavering breath—"during your temporary union, did she become...*with child*?"

My breath hitched. "No." It was only one of many disappointments about our situation.

Father released a breath of relief. "Good. If she had...things could have gotten very messy, even more so than they already are." He gave me a searching look. "Are you sure?"

I managed a nod. "We never consummated....she wanted to wait—" And now I finally understood why. I squeezed my eyes shut. "She never loved me."

"You know that's not true, dear," Mother said. "We saw you two together. She loves you very much."

"But then why—"

"She knew she wasn't really Lavena, even if you didn't," Mother said gently. "Thus she knew you weren't hers. She likely couldn't give herself to you knowing that."

It was so unfair. Now I'd never know what it'd be like to love and cherish her completely...unless we married for real. "Please help me marry her," I pleaded. "I need her."

"We know, dear," Mother said. "We'll do everything in our power to break the contract."

Father nodded his assent, his face set with determination, and since my parting from Anwen a few hours ago, I finally felt a glimmer of hope.

I'd find a way to be with the love of my life, for now that I'd found her, nothing would make me let her go.

"Whoa, Liam, what happened?"

It was the most informal greeting I'd ever received from my proper best friend, Prince Aiden, which meant I must look quite the sight. It wasn't surprising. The past several endless weeks of missing Anwen and enduring Lavena had practically done me in.

I sank into an armchair, entirely spent. "Where to begin?"

"Perhaps with the reason for your urgent request to visit Sortileya." Aiden studied my face, as if seeking for clues to my dark mood.

Eileen's brow furrowed as she glanced at the now closed door. "Didn't dear Lavena accompany you?"

"Thank goodness, no." I shuddered to hear the endearment *dear* attached to *her*. "That shrew is back in Draceria. I'm here for a momentarily reprieve and for ideas for a foul-proof murder."

Eileen gasped and Aiden's eyes widened. "That *shrew*? So much for you falling in love with her."

"I have never, ever felt any such emotion for that horrible woman," I spat. "I've always hated her, but my feelings have now intensified—I *loathe* her. Dealing with dragons would be preferable than being with *her*."

"But when we last visited, you said you loved her," Aiden said. "From what I witnessed I could tell it was true."

I gave a hollow laugh. "I never denied I loved the remarkable woman you met during your last visit."

Aiden and Eileen exchanged thoroughly bewildered looks. "Um...I'm confused," Eileen said. "Can you clarify how you can hate and love the same woman?"

"You're not going to believe what I'm about to tell you," I said. "It sounds exactly like a story Rosalina would concoct, but that woman you met your last visit...wasn't Lavena."

Their mouths fell open in astonishment. Eileen recovered first. "What do you mean? Of course she was...wasn't she?"

Aiden frowned. "Are you saying that the women we met, the one you married—"

"Was an imposter," I said. "Yes, that's exactly what I'm telling you."

Their stunned silence was deafening. When neither of them spoke, I seized the opportunity to share the story as soon as possible in hopes that by doing so, they could shed light on my seemingly hopeless situation.

"Apparently, Lavena had a lookalike handmaiden who—"

Eileen gasped. "Oh, she does. I've seen her."

I stared. "You mean before your last visit?"

"Yes." She leaned forward, her eyes bright. "She accompanied Lavena to Aiden's Princess Competition. I noticed her when she stood with the other attending servants."

I'd seen the attending servants so many times they became invisible. The thought that Anwen had been so near to me... "You mean Anwen was so close to me and I never noticed her?"

Eileen's expression softened with sympathy. "Is that her name?"

"Yes." I swallowed in an attempt to stave off my emotions.

Aiden slowly shook his head. "This entire situation is unbelievable. She was entirely different than the Lavena I know, but I never would have suspected a different person, although it seems obvious looking back. In comparison to Lavena, this Anwen was rather..." He paused, searching for the appropriate word.

"Remarkable?" I offered.

"Yes," Eileen said. "She had a sweetness about her, as well as a quiet contentment, one that, from what I remember of her, isn't like the real Lavena."

"Indeed she's not. She and Anwen are opposites in every way." I sighed. "I should have known something was amiss. Anwen is so incredible, so sweet, so gentle...so different than Lavena in every way. I couldn't believe the change in who I thought was Lavena, couldn't believe how quickly and effortlessly I fell in love with her." I shook my head. "Is it any wonder? She wasn't really Lavena."

Aiden's expression became serious. "How did you find out about the switch? Did this—Anwen, was it?—tell you, or—"

"Lavena returned wanting her old life back, exposed Anwen, and is now driving me insane, insisting on fulfilling our engagement contract. Now that I love Anwen, I could never marry anyone else, much less that wench, especially when she looks so similar to the woman I love."

Eileen's forehead furrowed. "I don't understand how Lavena's desires have any grounds. Aren't you already married to Anwen?"

"Apparently that marriage is void, considering she took her vows under a false name." It was so unfair.

Aiden's frown deepened. "Any illegitimate children?"

The last thing I wanted to tell my best friend was that I'd never consummated my marriage with the woman I loved. But by the way Eileen's expression twisted, I could tell she feared Anwen ruined. I sighed, relenting.

"We actually...didn't consummate. She wanted to wait and—"

Eileen slumped in relief. "Is it any wonder? The poor girl likely realized she wasn't really married."

My stomach knotted. Had she? "It doesn't matter now," I said. "As long as I find a way to marry her for real."

Aiden leaned back in his seat and propped his leg up. "I take it Lavena isn't willing to release you from your engagement contract."

"Not at all. So I've come seeking your advice on how to get out of the horrible arrangement I find myself in."

"What have you tried?" Aiden asked.

"Negotiating, searching desperately for a loophole, everything. We've been scrambling for a way out for weeks with no hope in sight." My heart tightened with despair and I forced myself to push it away. I couldn't give up hope. "Lavena has alternated between flirting with me and driving me insane. She believes there's no way out of our union, but this is one battle I refuse to allow her to win."

Aiden sighed. "Contracts are tricky things. Mine was broken by a mutual agreement, but I take it the Lycerian Monarchy isn't willing to agree to that?"

"Not at all," I said.

"Then you must find another way. I'll be happy to help you."

"Then let's get started." I rose and so did he. "I can only stay for a few days, but I'm hoping you'll help me pretend I'm here longer; I want to go to Lyceria and find Anwen."

Eileen's expression softened. "You must miss her."

"More than anything."

"Then we'll happily serve as your alibi while helping you find a solution. I'm sure we'll succeed. After all, love always finds a way."

"It does, for even if we don't find a solution, I'm prepared to take the extremest measure."

Aiden's expression became grave. He knew what I referred to—abdications, elopement, breaking a contract, and thus causing tension between Draceria and Lyceria with my actions. "While Lavena is unfit to be Draceria's queen and I want your happiness, I pray it doesn't come to that, my friend."

He patted my shoulder before we adjourned to the library. As I followed him and Eileen, I withdrew one of Anwen's wonderful letters, one that was worn from having

been read so frequently since I'd received it. Although I had its contents memorized, my gaze automatically went to my favorite paragraph:

One of the things I love most about you, Liam, is your determination. When you set your heart to something, nothing prevents you from seeing it through. Thus I have hope. I pray you do too.

I stroked her words with my thumb. *She loves you dearly, my heart whispered. You know it's true. And she'll fight for you as much as you're fighting for her.* At the thought, the hope burning in my heart grew.

We'd be together. Somehow.