

## \*~Archer's Perspective: Reve's True Identity~\*

Long journeys and visits were considerably more pleasant when my thoughts were occupied with the image of a certain dark haired, dark eyed beauty and daydreams of the life I wanted to create with her. Ever since our conversation about our upcoming courtship, I'd scarcely thought of anything but Reve, making everything else vying to occupy my mind nothing more than an unwanted distraction.

By Anwen's frequent mischievous glances—on the journey to Draceria, throughout our entire birthday celebrations, and in the time we'd spent together in the days afterwards—she suspected the direction of my thoughts. I suppressed a sigh. As much as I valued my sister's company and had treasured my time with her and my adorable niece, her interest in the sole occupant of my thoughts had quickly grown wearying, especially when she had the habit of popping up at unexpected moments...like now.

"I know who you're thinking about," she said in a playful tone as she once more appeared by my side.

I merely grunted in response, as usual not in the mood to humor her with a response when she was being so meddling. "I'm not thinking about anything in particular."

She gave me a skeptical look and I shifted a bit guiltily at having been caught in that particular lie...again.

"Oh really? You're not thinking about a certain *someone*, the one you couldn't stop staring at during both of our entire visits with her?"

In truth I hadn't been thinking of Reve specifically in that moment, but rather what improvements she might want me to make to the kitchen...should she want to use it... should our courtship progress in the way I hoped...

"I'm not thinking of her, but rather the kitchen in the cottage and what improvements it might need and...why are you looking at me like that?" For Anwen's mischievous smile had only widened.

"Oh, improvements to a certain kitchen soon to have a mistress presiding over it? Perhaps you should ask Reve what she'd like?" She waggled her eyebrows.

My cheeks warmed. "Why would Reve...care about the kitchen...?"

She rolled her eyes. "Why wouldn't she? But if you want to pretend that after years of bachelorhood you haven't finally found a woman you're clearly interested in creating

a life with, then I suppose I can humor you, though you're really taking all the fun out of everything."

"I'm not trying to take the fun out of anything," I said hastily. "We're simply not courting." I chose to remain silent of my plans to remedy that the moment I returned to Lyceria.

"Not yet," she corrected, as usual not fooled by my evasion.

I shifted nervously, though I couldn't deny, even to myself, how my anxious thoughts grew warmer as they drifted down that rather inviting path. *Courting Reve...* immediately my mind whirled with all the possibilities such a courtship would entail, only halting when I glimpsed another of my sister's mischievous smiles.

"I know who you're thinking of," she said in a singsong tone, which earned another grunt from me.

"Must you tease me so?"

"How can I not?" She rested a light hand on my arm. "I've spent years for you to finally find happiness. I can't tell you how worried I've been when I think of you living in our cottage all alone."

"I'm not alone. I have the animals. And a farmhand."

She gave me a *look*. "You know that's not what I meant."

Though I'd never admit it, I knew she was right. The longer I lived alone, the emptier the cottage seemed to become. To return from a hunt and be greeted not with the usual silence I'd grown far too accustomed to, but instead the cheerful smile of Reve sitting by the fire, perhaps with children playing at her feet...

Too late I realized I was grinning like a fool. I quickly tucked my joy behind my usual serious mask but Anwen had already seen it. She smiled brightly. "I'm truly happy for you. Reve seems like a lovely woman."

"She is." Not only was she beautiful, but she had a sweetness and innocence about her that I found thoroughly charming, not to mention I'd grown to crave her friendship and company.

Anwen worried her lip. "And her memory condition doesn't bother you?"

It was admittedly a valid concern, but compared to all the happiness a union with Reve would bring me—not just a respite from loneliness, but in genuine friendship, affection, even *love*—it was a price I'd gladly pay.

"It's only a minor inconvenience, as well as an opportunity for me not only to serve her, but help her create memories that will last forever."

"And if it worsens?"

I frowned at that likely possibility, but though that path would undoubtedly present difficulties, it didn't daunt me enough to sway me. "We'll deal with it one day at a time. Marriage isn't without its challenges, but together we'll see them through...why are you smirking?"

Her grin widened. "Because you said *marriage*. I knew that was the direction your thoughts had gone."

Blast, I'd been caught. I rolled my eyes but couldn't quite resist grinning in return. "I can never hide anything from you."

"Then why do you even try?"

I shrugged. "Because I'm the older brother. It's my job to tease my younger sister."

She pressed her hands to her hips. "You're only older by seven minutes."

But her disgruntled look quickly disappeared when a cheerful giggle from her daughter drifted across the royal parlor where we sat visiting. Anwen glanced towards where her husband enthusiastically played with little Anea.

He was thoroughly distracted, so there was no risk he'd overheard our conversation. Even so, she leaned closer and lowered her voice. "Can't I tell him?"

"No." This wasn't the first time she'd asked, and I was baffled why she continued to press me when she knew me well enough to know my answer wouldn't change.

She sighed, looking unsurprised yet still thoroughly put out. "You're being rather unfair, Archer. I only have one brother and part of the fun is sharing every detail about your new *obsession* with my husband."

"A husband who has the tendency to share things that aren't his business?" I lifted my eyebrows and she frowned.

"I'm sure he won't say anything if I ask him not to..." But she remained uncertain; she knew even better than I did how much Prince Liam couldn't keep a secret, especially when it was one that contained a good story.

"Please don't say anything, Anwen," I pleaded. "This is still so new for me. I'm not even sure whether or not it'll go anywhere..."

"Oh, but it will," Anwen said cheerfully. "From what I observed between you and Reve, the path you're on together only has one inevitable destination."

Once more she waggled her eyebrows and my stomach gave a pleasant flip at the thought of marrying Reve. It was strange that before I'd met her I'd given little thought to the idea of marriage, yet now I was wondering what I'd found so objectionable about the idea. Perhaps it was impossible to *not* want it now that I found the right woman, one I cared deeply for even though in many ways we were quite different.

"I just...don't want anything to go wrong," I said. "Please, keep my confidence until things become more serious."

She searched my expression and finally nodded. "Very well, I will keep this to myself until you wish it...but only on the condition you write me every detail and allow me to give you advice."

Her promise lifted much of my apprehension from my shoulders, allowing me to feel lighthearted enough to tease her. "You don't think me charming enough to win the heart of a fair maiden?"

She rolled her eyes. "Charming or not, you can be rather thickheaded when it comes to women, and I want nothing to mess this up."

I was terrified of the prospect of muddling up so badly I lost Reve, so I reluctantly agreed, also knowing my sister wouldn't let me hear the end of it otherwise.

The remainder of our visit passed pleasantly though restlessly considering how often my thoughts repeatedly drifted. I'd never been more anxious to part from my sister to return to Lyceria. Though Prince Liam seemed confused by my unusual restlessness, by Anwen's cheerfulness she didn't seem to mind.

It was a fine day to travel. I'd left the Dracerian palace only a few short hours ago and was already making good time, pushing my horse faster than was likely wise, but I was eager to complete the journey considering who awaited me at the end of it.

I hadn't been riding long when my attention was captured by a poster attached to a tree alongside the road. I yanked on the reins, jerking the horse to a stop and stared openmouthed at the poster, which bore the likeness of a woman I'd hadn't stopped thinking about since departing from her.

*Reve.*

I'd recognize her anywhere, especially with how familiar her features had become with how often I'd thought of them. My brow puckered. What was Reve doing on a poster in Draceria—and then I noticed the words beneath her picture:

*Missing: Her Royal Highness Princess Reve of Malvagaria. Reward offered for any information as to her whereabouts.*

I stared, my mind numb with disbelief. No...it couldn't be true. But there was no mistaking that the drawn likeness was Reve, which meant that she was a missing princess.

This was far worse than her being noble.

Pain, stronger even than when Anwen had gone missing years ago during her forced masquerade as Princess Lavena, washed over me. With it came a sense of loss of not only the woman I'd grown to care for but the beautiful future I'd finally allowed myself to believe was within reach, but which was now impossible.

For Reve was a princess, and thus she didn't belong with a common man such as myself...no matter how much I still wanted her. All the memories we'd shared together as well as all the ones I'd wanted to create with her slipped away, stolen.

I could scarcely think through the burning torment this revelation had caused as I blindly swiveled the horse back around and rode briskly to the palace, desperate to confide in my sister, all while mourning the loss of the first woman I'd ever loved.

Darkness had settled by the time I returned to the Dracerian palace. I hopped off the horse and threw the reins at the stableboy who'd stepped out to assist me; by the confusion puckering his brow, he recognized me from the one he'd assisted earlier... the one who was supposed to be on his way home to Lyceria before everything had changed.

"Sir?" he tentatively asked, but I had no time for explanations. I walked briskly up the palace steps and nearly careened into the footman who hastened to open the door for me.

I entered the gilded marble entrance hall, an elegance more repulsive considering it represented the world Reve truly belonged in, one vastly different from my own. Down the opulent corridor came the sounds of voices mingled with the clink of china from the formal dinner currently in progress, where my sister undoubtedly was.

Another footman approached, but before he could make any inquiries, I spun on him. "I need to see Anwen."

He pursed his lips in clear disapproval. "Their Highnesses are currently in the middle of an important meal with some visiting dignitaries and aren't currently open to visitors—"

I talked over him. "Please, this is important. Tell An—er, Princess Anwen that her brother has an urgent matter to discuss with her."

I must have looked rather desperate, for the footman ceased his protests and bowed. "Very well. If you'll wait just a moment in the yellow parlor." He motioned to the nearest room and I went in, but I couldn't wait sitting down, my whirling thoughts making it impossible to remain still.

I paced the length of the parlor a dozen or so times before the door finally opened to reveal my sister. She entered on her husband's arm, still in her evening finery from the formal meal I'd just interrupted. Both looked quite worried to see me back so soon, especially Anwen.

She immediately released the prince and hurried up to me. "Why have you returned? Are you alright?"

Whatever composure I'd managed to cling to by a fragile sliver broke. "She's a princess!"

Her brows furrowed. "What? Who's a princess? What are you talking about?"

"Reve!" I handed her the poster and Prince Liam hovered over her shoulder to study it, too. By her widening eyes Anwen understood.

"Oh. I can't believe I didn't realize...yes, that's why her name seemed so familiar."

Prince Liam's brow puckered as he perused the poster. "This is Princess Reve of Malvagaría, who's been missing for a year, ever since Briar and Drake's visit to Draceria last autumn."

The length of her absence fit the elusive memories Reve had shared with me that day she visited my cottage. That time felt so long ago, back when I'd been filled with nothing but hopes of her reaction to the home I'd hoped to share with her. I closed my eyes, mortified, as I recalled the eager way I'd shown off my cottage in anticipation of her living there one day—a cottage which to her was undoubtedly nothing more than a pathetic shack, a place entirely unfitting for a princess.

It wasn't just the cottage—no part of my common life was fit for the likes of her. The heaviness pressing against my heart became unbearable; I collapsed in the nearest seat.

Anwen easily guessed the direction of my thoughts. "This...need not change anything, Archer," she said gently.

"It changes *everything*," I said. "I'm a common man, Anwen. And she's...she's..." I couldn't even say the word that had become nothing more than a curse ever since learning that it was a part of the woman I loved, one I'd now never be able to have.

All the plans for our courtship, renovating the cottage to Reve's liking, of building a life with her...all vanished in an instant, slipping away as quickly as her memories often did. They left behind an aching void, one more acute than the loneliness I'd felt before now that all hopes of abating it had been stolen from me. I couldn't believe I'd allowed myself to dream of anything else.

What a fool I'd been.

Anwen's frown deepened, looking more disapproving than somber on my behalf. "Does your refusal of her have anything to do with your feelings towards royals?"

I considered. While my dislike for that class as a whole hadn't abated, Reve was... different, separate from the rest. Simply because she was special to me.

But no longer. I couldn't allow myself to care for a woman I couldn't have, not when her title created an obstacle impossible to overcome. But I couldn't simply *stop* caring, making losing her all the more devastating.

Prince Liam looked back and forth between me, the poster, and his wife. "Please put me out of my misery and tell me what's going on. What does the missing Malvagarian princess have to do with your brother?"

But even before Anwen could answer, Prince Liam's eyes widened, as if all the pieces had just assembled together in his mind. And then he was grinning.

"Oh. He fancies her, doesn't he? I'm not sure how such a twist occurred, but I must learn the story immediately."

I couldn't bear to share the story of how Reve and I had met now that it led to nowhere but a dead end. At my silence and the subtle shake of her head from Anwen, Prince Liam sighed.

"Another time, then." But his disappointment didn't last long before he was grinning again. "Wow, your brother and a princess. A fine reason to finally settle down, though I prefer common girls myself." His arm wound around Anwen to nestle her against his side.

I wasn't in the mood for his teasing; I could barely maintain my composure as it was. Anwen gave her husband a gentle look. "Archer isn't in the mood, dear."

Prince Liam immediately sobered. "Right, I can tease him about the girl he fancies after their union is settled."

"I'm not going to marry her," I grumbled. "She's a *princess*."

Prince Liam simply shrugged. "And Anwen is a common girl. It makes no difference."

"It does when a princess lowers her station for a man who doesn't deserve her."

Prince Liam made to protest, but stopped at his wife's light hand on his arm. He sighed and returned to studying the poster. "I've heard about this cursed, missing princess. Her brother, Briar, has been in an uproar trying to find her."

"What do you know about her?" I both wanted to know and was afraid of learning more; surely it'd only cause me to care more deeply, an unappealing scenario when I was trying very hard not to care at all.

Prince Liam considered. "Princess Reve is the youngest, a rather spoiled girl from what I've heard. And she's cursed, just like the rest of the Malvagarian royal siblings are supposed to be...or rather *were*, considering Briar and Drake's curses have been broken."

Reve was *cursed*? Foreboding knotted my stomach. "What type of curse?" If anyone knew anything about such a thing, it'd be this story-obsessed prince.

Prince Liam simply shrugged. "No one really knows. Rumor has it that it has something to do with her mind, but I know nothing else."

Something to do with her mind...the unease invading my stomach only tightened. "Something like...a curse of forgetfulness, by chance?"

Prince Liam's eyebrows shot up. "You mean you know what it is?"

"Reve is losing her memories," I said. "She didn't even know her real name until recently, let alone that she's a princess."

I expected the prince to give one of the humorous quips he never seemed able to resist, but to my surprise he grew serious. "Ah, that is quite the curse."

"And it's not just her memories," I said. "Her sleep is also being affected." The worry I often felt when thinking of Reve returned tenfold, unable to stay away despite my determination for distance.

Anwen brightened. "But if it's a curse afflicting her, then her condition isn't permanent and can be broken. We must send word to Malvagaría immediately. Her family is undoubtedly worried about her."

I snorted. "Unlikely, considering they're royals."

Prince Liam gave me a dark look, an unusual one for the typically easygoing prince, and too late I realized I'd allowed my faltering emotions to not keep my usual aversion in check. "Even as a *royal* I care deeply for my sisters, and Briar is no different."

I shifted guiltily, knowing I'd gone too far; the news about Reve had rattled me beyond sense. I lowered my gaze in remorse.

Anwen settled on the arm of the chair to rest her hand on my shoulder. "Briar is undoubtedly worried. We must write and arrange for him to retrieve her. When you return to Lyceria, you need to tell her who she is and about her family."

My stomach lurched. "I can't; it'll be too much for her to take in at once. Her condition—*curse*—worsened just by her learning her name. If I share too much with her at once, what if it worsens further?"

Prince Liam's frown was pensive. "I will write Briar with the news and ask for his advice on the matter. I have no doubt he'll come for her the moment he receives word. Wait to hear from him and allow him to be the one to decide how much to share with her, considering he better understands the curses afflicting his family than we do."

"And if he doesn't come soon?" I asked. "Winter is soon to arrive. Waiting until spring for her to return home is too long."

"Then you must take her back to Malvagaría yourself."

He and Anwen began discussing the logistics concerning the matter but I scarcely listened. My mind still whirled, even as my heart ached at the thought of losing Reve soon. Even though I knew I couldn't have her, I didn't want her to return to Malvagaría to her old royal life, where I had no hopes of seeing her again.

*It's for the best*, I tried to convince myself. *You have to stop caring for her*. I tried to rid myself of the emotions, but the task was far more difficult than I could have ever imagined and my feelings remained, as strong and powerful as ever.

With them, the prospect of returning home felt heavier and more unbearable than it ever had before, especially when I now realized that my empty, lonely cottage would be something I'd never be able to escape, my dreams of sharing a life with Reve forever unfulfilled. Despite knowing I had to let her go, I couldn't just stop feeling what

I did for her. Which meant I'd have to live with the heartache of her absence for the rest of my life.