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~Liam~

As I stared down at my plate, I made an effort to soothe Alex's agitation. Falling sick was a rare occurrence for me, so I doubted if that was the cause of my unease. I glanced over at Justin, who seemed engrossed in conversation with his wolf. Much to my dismay, Josephine occupied the seat across from me next to Justin. Without hesitation, Elaine settled beside Oliver, and their mutual gaze revealed a connection between them.

I could only hope that when the ladies reached the age of eighteen, they wouldn't face heartbreak upon realising they were not destined for one another but rather for someone else entirely.

Lost in my thoughts, I suddenly heard Josephine calling my name. I looked at her, my mouth dry and my heart racing. I couldn't comprehend why Alex was behaving this way. Clenching my napkin tightly on the table, I fought against an overwhelming wave of emotions that threatened to overwhelm me. Only I understood the intensity of what I was feeling in that moment.

"Congratulations," Josephine exclaimed, and I furrowed my brow, puzzled as to why she was congratulating me. My mind was muddled, struggling to think clearly.

"You graduated?" she clarified, and I nodded, feeling foolish for not realising sooner. Why hadn't I put the pieces together? Why was Alex acting strangely? I attempted to compose myself.

"Thank you," I managed to reply, but as she turned her attention to Justin, I sensed a fit of jealousy that made me wish she wouldn't. I fought back a growl, desperate to maintain control. The situation felt unbearable, and the urge to leave welled up within me. However, drawing unnecessary attention to myself was not a viable option.

I fought the urge to let out a growl as I observed Josephine gently touching Justin's hand. Why was Alex losing control? I had no idea what was triggering his behaviour. Josephine's brother, Luis, took a seat beside me, where Marvin should have been, but he was too busy getting cosy with Layla.

"What's up?" Luis asked me with a smile, and I nodded, though my eyes remained fixated on Josephine for reasons unknown to me.

"When did you guys arrive?" I finally managed to ask Luis, forcing myself to look at him, anything to divert my attention from Josephine.

"About forty-three minutes ago. My father was held up in a meeting regarding something related to your girlfriend's father. So we couldn't leave Gad on time," he explained, instantly piquing my interest.

"Why were they discussing Mike Maguire in Gad?" I inquired, and Luis shrugged.

"I don't know, but my father intends to assign one of us to work closely with Justin to investigate the incident in Grizlo. Your father requested it, mentioning something about keeping it within our circle. They'll discuss it with you. Anyway, I'm excited. The three of us scored exceptionally well in that department and are eager to put our skills to good use. Hopefully, they choose me," he said, and I

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nodded, feeling inadequate.

It was disheartening when juniors caught up with you, but that was the Stepanovs for you—they were prodigies who had earned double promotions as a result. I had completely forgotten that they had graduated a few months before us. Suddenly, I felt selfish for my own shortcomings.

"Congratulations, by the way," Luis said to me, and I nodded in acknowledgement.

"You too," I replied, returning the sentiment, and a smile crossed his face, indicating that my words meant a lot to him.

Turning my attention to Josephine, I realised that I hadn't yet congratulated her.

"Hey," I said, catching her gaze with my own.

"Congratulations," I offered, and she responded with a smile.

"Thanks, your highness. Didn't think you would remember," she said playfully, summing up our brief exchange before redirecting her attention back to Justin. Alex seemed unsettled by their interaction, and I couldn't fathom why.

As the food was served, we all began to eat. Justin, much like his father, had a talent for enlivening the atmosphere. His jokes elicited laughter from everyone, particularly Josephine, who seemed captivated by his presence. Not once did she spare me a glance, and that bothered me. Moreover, I couldn't shake off the scent of dill that seemed to surround her. I contemplated asking her if she was using

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something related to dill as a fragrance or perfume.

After dinner, we made our way to the living room to continue the festivities and spend time together. Our parents were likely gathered in the lounge, enjoying their own conversations.

As we walked towards the living room, Josephine moved closer to me, and I couldn't help but wonder what she wanted. Her presence was driving my wolf to the brink of madness.

"Hey," she greeted me, and I looked at her, offering a smile.

"I heard about Sophia; sorry to hear that. I know you two were close," she said, and I nodded in acknowledgement.

"We are still close," I corrected her, and she fell silent, seemingly taken aback by my response. I hadn't meant to sound curt, but the truth was, I was on edge, and she seemed to be the cause.

"I didn't mean it that way. Of course, I know you are close," she quickly clarified, and I shook my head.

"I apologise for my tone," I said sincerely, and she smiled at me as if she hadn't expected my apology. She nodded, indicating that she accepted it.

"Forget about Sophia," I heard Alex's voice echoing in my mind. He was attempting to communicate with Josephine and not me, and I was grateful that I alone could hear that conversation.

"Anyway, my father mentioned that one of us will be assisting Justin with the investigation. We'll do everything we can to ensure she is

found," she said, patting me on the shoulder and preparing to walk away. In that moment, I reached out and held her hand.

I couldn't explain why I did it, but the touch sent an electric shock through me. She looked at me with surprise, then glanced at our joined hands as I stood rooted to the spot while the others continued ahead. I didn't want to let go. Touching her hand felt inexplicably right, and suddenly, I found myself questioning what was happening to me. I had known Josephine my entire life, and she had always been intimidating. This was an entirely new experience. 1

"Li?" she asked, her gaze fixed on me. It felt as if I were in a trance, unable to snap out of it no matter how hard I tried. Managing to find my voice, I quickly questioned her.

"Why do you smell like dill?" I blurted out, and she frowned, sniffing the air around her.

"Are you feeling all right, Li?" she inquired, concern evident in her voice. And with that simple question, I knew exactly what had transpired.

Releasing her hand abruptly, I turned away and started walking towards my room with haste. I dared not answer or look in her direction. I had to move swiftly, desperate to avoid doing something I would regret.

"Li! Li! Liam!" Josephine called after me, but I refused to acknowledge her. I had to keep moving, afraid that any moment longer would result in a complete loss of control.

"This can't be happening to us now," I whispered to my wolf, my mind

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filled with chaotic howls of Alex.

"But it is happening, and it has," my wolf responded, his voice firm.

"Josephine. It can't be Josephine; she's practically family," I protested, desperately searching for any reason to deny the reality of the situation. But Alex disagreed.

"Our parents may be close, and she may come from the second ruling line, but she isn't related to us by blood, Li," he countered, his voice filled with a sombre acceptance. Yet, even with that knowledge, I couldn't shake off the overwhelming emotions flooding over me.

We had practically grown up together, with only a year and a few months separating us. Why had fate chosen to play such a cruel trick on me?

"Fate has not made a mistake, Li. This is a rare opportunity, and I believe we should embrace it," Alex insisted, his voice filled with conviction, but I shook my head in disagreement.

"I don't like her. She's stubborn, annoying, and always trying to prove herself, especially to us. I can't handle that kind of behaviour. And her sense of fashion... it's just not my taste. She doesn't seem to care about anything," I complained, venting my frustrations.

"But you liked Sophia for similar reasons," Alex pointed out, leaving me flustered as I stormed into my room.

"No, Sophia is different. She's kind, gentle, and sweet. Josephine is wild," I argued, though deep down, I knew Alex had a point. I found myself desperately trying to convince myself that fate had made a

mistake.

"I can't give up on Sophia. I'm the only one actively searching for her, trying to protect her," I protested to Alex.

"We will continue our search for Sophia, but we can't dismiss this gift from fate for her sake. She isn't meant for us. Consider this, Li: every time we try to express our emotions, something always gets in the way. It's a significant sign, and I don't think it's fair to ignore fate and leave Josephine behind. How do you think she would feel?" Alex questioned, reasoning with me.

"She'll be fine. She doesn't strike me as someone who needs a man or desires a committed relationship," I retorted, causing Alex to become visibly angry with me.

"Let's at least give fate a chance, Li," Alex urged, and I sat down on my bed, feeling a mixture of fear and uncertainty.

"But if I say yes now, what will happen to Sophia? Our father won't continue pulling strings, and they might let her go. She's in serious danger," I voiced my concern, and Alex understood the dilemma I was facing.

"If I say yes and pursue a relationship with Josephine, Sophia may become forgotten, and the support system in place for her could be removed. Besides being my best friend at school, she may no longer hold significance," I explained, weighing the consequences in my mind.

"What if I reject Josephine like Father rejected Aunt Susan? Couldn't the bond then shift to Sophia?" I asked Alex, hoping for a different

outcome. However, his response left me frustrated.

"Mother had to reject Uncle Devin first. What makes you think Sophia would reject her fated partner if she finds him? Besides, I simply don't see a valid reason to reject Josephine," he countered, his annoyance evident. I fell silent because, deep down, I knew he was right.

I had no genuine reason to reject Josephine.

My fear stemmed from the possibility that Josephine might reject me. We had grown apart over the past two years, and she had kept to herself during that time. I wasn't sure what had caused the change, but she hadn't been friendly towards me, Marvin, Oliver, and Miles for quite some time. She would exchange brief greetings and engage in small talk before moving on. She had grown closer to the triplets, my sister, and Lilly, but most of her time was spent absorbed in reading or working on calculations. Honestly, I had no legitimate grounds to reject her, yet I doubted that a relationship would work between us due to our lack of common ground.

"We never really gave her a fair chance, did we? Everyone was easily intimidated by her because of her high IQ. Her only friends were her siblings and cousins, who also had exceptional intellects. I believe that contributed to her attitude. Perhaps we should give it a chance," Alex suggested, and his words made me chuckle.

I had never looked at Josephine from that perspective, but Alex had a valid point. She could be quite intimidating.

However, I had no intention of actively pursuing anything with her. Instead, I planned to keep my observations to myself and take the



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time to understand her better. A year and six months should be sufficient to gather information and figure things out. There was even a possibility that she might not want to accept the bond when the time came. As Alex had rightly pointed out, the decision was not solely up to me. Nonetheless, having this knowledge now would undoubtedly make things awkward between us. I just knew it.

Despite her attitude, there was no denying that Josephine was stunning beneath the heavy eyeliner and serious demeanour. But looks alone weren't enough, and even though the moon had ignited a spark, it was ultimately up to us to determine whether we would let it grow into a blazing fire.



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