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~Josephine~

Arriving at Grizlo filled me with excitement. While the purpose of our visit wasn't joyous, the prospect of putting our abilities to the test filled me with enthusiasm. I secretly hoped to stay in Liam's wing, but I didn't want to impose or ask for it. So, when he eventually invited me to stay with him, it thrilled me beyond words.

Naturally, I had to hide my excitement, as Charlotte, with her keen eye, would never let me live it down. The fact that Liam chose a room next to his own made me feel incredibly valued and significant.

We had made remarkable progress in such a short time, but the recent turn of events left me wondering what could have possibly transpired.

"Sophia isn't around," Onyx's voice echoed in my mind, instantly dampening my spirits. My wolf had a way of being a killjoy at times.

Curious, I probed further, asking Onyx what she meant by that. However, she remained silent, leaving me to ponder her words as I stepped into the bathroom to freshen up. The statement lingered in my mind, raising questions about Liam's sudden kindness. Could it be connected to Sophia's absence? Was he missing her and seeking comfort in my company?

It struck me because Liam had never attempted to bridge the awkward gap between us. He had always kept his distance, seemingly unaware of my discomfort around him and Sophia. It

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made me realise that my father's instincts were right in picking up on the signs, but I hadn't fully grasped the situation until Onyx brought up Sophia during breakfast.

I reluctantly got dressed, lacking enthusiasm for going out, and decided to forgo my contact lenses and eyeliner. Lost in my thoughts, a soft knock on my door interrupted me. I got up, trying to shake off the sombre mood, and went to see who it was. To my surprise, it was Liam, dressed in a fresh white shirt and jeans, appearing as if he had just showered, emanating a pleasant scent of soap. His face lit up with a broad grin when he saw me.

"You freshened up too," he remarked, and I absentmindedly touched my damp hair, realising I had skipped both my contacts and eyeliner. Before I could react further, Liam gently reached out and pulled my hand away from my face.

"Don't even think about it," he said, his intentions unclear as I furrowed my brow, wondering what he meant by that.

Liam inched closer, but I stood my ground by the door. He stepped so close that I had to tilt my head upward to meet his gaze. Being in such proximity sent butterflies swirling in my stomach. Why did he have to be so incredibly attractive? It was simpler when I considered him a douchebag, but this newfound side of him would be difficult to resist.

"Liam," I managed to say, my voice barely above a whisper. He gently caressed my cheeks with both hands, guiding them to keep my eyes locked onto his.

"Your eyes are the most captivating feature of your face, Joe. They

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are truly beautiful. Please, don't cover them, at least for now. I'll see if I can arrange some transparent contacts for you. I simply adore gazing into those eyes," Liam said, leaving me utterly astonished.

"Well, I guess you were wrong, Onyx because Sophia does not have Stepanov eyes," I linked my wolf, and she huffed in response.

Liam withdrew his hands as if snapping out of a trance and took a gentle step back, creating an unseen distance between us.

"I was hoping you'd join me for a walk. Since you haven't been to Grizlo often, it would be an honour to show you around," he suggested with a warm smile.

I saw his wolf flash again, but I pretended not to notice because I figured he didn't want me to notice it either. All I could figure out now was that his wolf was also fond of me, and now that his wolf had flashed just like it did when he asked me to stay in his wing and many other times we were together, I could easily tell Alex was hopeful I would say yes.

"I would love to," I replied, noticing the instant excitement in Liam's eyes. Alex also briefly flashed, and I was pleased that I could now understand his wolf's emotions.

"Keep in mind that we won't be dining with the others. I've got a wonderful restaurant in mind that I'd like to take you to," he said, waiting for me to get ready. I slipped on my slippers, grabbed a jacket, and decided to forgo the eyeliner today.

With a smile, I walked out of my room, and Liam and I strolled together out of the beta's wing. As we stepped outside, we spotted

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Marvin engaged in a phone conversation. I knew exactly who he was talking to, and I doubted that Alpha Devin would permit his daughters to come to Grizlo.

I felt a pang of sympathy for the Corrigan sisters. Hopefully, their father would have a change of heart, and they would join us in the second batch.

As Liam and I stepped out together, he gently held my hand, and the touch instantly eased my nerves. But a mix of questions and doubts flooded my mind. Was this gesture merely friendly, or did it hold a deeper meaning? Did he hold Sophia's hand like this? Were they as close as we seemed to be now? Did his wolf react in the same way when they were together? And the most haunting question: Would he have made a move like this if Sophia hadn't disappeared?

Despite my attempts to clear my mind of these thoughts, they persisted, incessantly echoing within me. Onyx had undoubtedly stirred up a whirlwind of emotions, and her silence spoke volumes about the situation.

"The pack house is at the heart of Grizlo, and you can practically reach any destination from here. However, taking a cab will save us time this time," Liam explained, glancing briefly at me before signalling for a cab.

"Why didn't we just take one of the cars?" I inquired, and he gently squeezed my hand as a cab pulled up in front of us.

"Because Onyx and Alex will bring us back," he replied, implying that we would shift and run back. The memory of our last exhilarating run during the picnic party brought a smile to my face, and I couldn't help

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but let out a small squeal at the thought. My reaction elicited a grin from him, and he reached out to open the cab door for me. I hopped in, and he followed suit.

"Take us to Fellowship Park, private section," Liam instructed the cab driver, who seemed pleasantly surprised to have such distinguished passengers.

"Yes, your highness. Good evening, Lady Stepanov," the driver greeted me, acknowledging my status as the true heir of my generation, with Noah falling second due to being a Volkov and an Alpha. I smiled back at the cab driver, and Liam did the same.

Initially, we sat a bit apart, but feeling bold, I decided to take a chance and moved closer to Liam. To my delight, he welcomed the proximity and held me close to him. It felt surreal, and I could hardly believe that this was happening. However, I tried not to overthink it and simply enjoyed the moment.

Reflecting on the past, I wondered if I had acted too hastily in trying to talk to him two years ago. Perhaps things would have unfolded differently between us. Regardless, I was grateful that we managed to cross that bridge and reach this point. Now, I couldn't help but wonder if there was a possibility for us to be more than just friends.

Snuggling in closer to him, I breathed in his comforting and pleasant scent. I felt safe in his arms as he gently stroked my arm, creating an atmosphere of warmth and affection between us.

As we arrived at the park, the cab driver refused to accept payment from Liam, much to his insistence. The driver was simply overjoyed that we had chosen his cab. It dawned on me that the Volkovs didn't

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typically use public transportation while they were in Grizlo. I couldn't resist teasing Liam about it, as it seemed evident that this decision was influenced by my presence.

With amusement in my voice, I said, "Looks like you're making an exception for me, Liam."

He chuckled and replied, "Well, I can't help it." His smile made him so handsome that I got shy.

We then approached the park gates, and the beauty of the place was already visible from the outside. As the guard noticed Liam and me, he promptly opened the gate and saluted us. Liam graciously thanked him, and we stepped inside the park, ready to explore its wonders together.

The sun was beginning to set, and I couldn't help but wonder if we were heading to the restaurant Liam had boasted about. As we strolled together, our arms intertwined, I allowed him to lead the way. Before long, we reached our destination, and to my surprise, it was a food truck. I burst into laughter.

"This is the restaurant?" I asked him, still chuckling, and he nodded with a wide grin. Despite my initial expectations, I found myself thoroughly enjoying the unexpected twist. There was a beautifully set table outside the food truck, and it had a tasteful ambience that made the experience even more delightful.

I continued to laugh, finding the situation amusing and endearing. While I had envisioned a fancy restaurant, this unique and casual setting brought a whole new level of excitement. I couldn't wait to try the food and savour the moment with Liam.



A woman emerged from the food truck, offering a warm smile as she greeted us. "Your Highness, it's wonderful to see you again," she said, and I sensed that Liam must have been a frequent visitor to this place, which left me with a knot of unease. Could this have been one of the spots he used to bring Sophia to? Was this their special place?

"The table is ready," the woman announced, bowing to me.

"You are most welcome, Lady Josephine. It's an honour to have you here," she added, surprising me with her knowledge of my identity. I had always tried to avoid the spotlight, so I wondered how she could tell it was me. Perhaps my eyes and hair were dead giveaways, but I suspected there was more to it.

Liam explained, "I mentioned I was bringing someone special this time." With that, he guided me to the set table, pulling out a chair for me. I sat down while he took the seat across from me. Though I was used to him sitting beside me, I decided to handle the slight distance between us with ease. The anticipation of the meal and the company were enough to keep my spirits high.

"Usually, I come here alone to enjoy the view. It's my quiet place. No one knows I come here," Liam revealed, and those words eased my heart. I was relieved to know that I wasn't replacing Sophia and Onyx had been mistaken. It was evident that our connection was unique and different from what he had with her.

"I'm happy to share this place with you then," I replied, and he smiled warmly at me.

The food was served, and I relished every dish the talented woman

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brought to our table. She was an excellent cook, and if circumstances allowed, I would have loved to bring her to Gad with me once all of this was over.

"I love her cooking, Li," I complimented, and he agreed with a smile.

"I'm glad we share the same opinion. There were times I imagined hiring her to be my personal cook when I have my own home," he admitted, seemingly taking the idea right out of my mind.

"Seriously! I was thinking about how to whisk her away to the Gad," I confessed, and we both laughed. Liam graciously paid for our meal, and we left the food truck area to enjoy the serene lake nearby. Despite the cool water, the overall temperature felt just right for me as we savoured the peaceful moment together.

"I know we just ate, but I really want to take a dip," Liam confessed with a mischievous grin, and I couldn't help but laugh.

"Honestly, I was thinking the same thing," I admitted, feeling a playful spark between us. Liam wasted no time and began to take off his clothes. He stripped down to his shorts, and even in the moonlight, his features looked striking. I couldn't help but admire him.

However, as I started undressing, a sense of shyness washed over me. It was peculiar because I had done this countless times before – shifting, going on hunts and runs with Liam and the others. But tonight felt different as if the moonlight held an intimate secret.

Gathering my courage, I managed to strip down to my bra and panties and approached the edge of the lake, where Liam stood waiting for me, his presence reassuring and inviting.



I stood beside him, and he gazed at me with concern.

"Are you sure you're up for this?" he asked, and I nodded with a smile. Under the enchanting moonlight, I felt ready for any adventure, no matter how wild.

Throwing caution to the wind, I jumped into the lake first, and he followed suit. We swam apart initially but gradually closed the distance between us until we were side by side and soon facing each other.

As we swam, Liam began mock-chattering his teeth, and it made me laugh because the water wasn't that cold. However, it soon dawned on me that our tolerance for the cold water was different, and I grew a bit worried.

"Goddess, Liam, let's get out of the water; your body temperature doesn't stabilise quickly like mine," I expressed my concern, noticing him shivering slightly as he tried to ward off the chill.

But he remained stubborn, insisting he was fine. I wasn't about to let Liam get sick on my watch, so I gently urged him to head back to the shore with me. I wanted to make sure he stayed safe and warm.

As I moved closer to him, prepared to pull him out of the water, he surprised me by pulling me into an embrace, holding me close to his chest. He buried his head in my neck, and I could feel his warm breath on my skin. It left me momentarily frozen, unsure of what was happening.

"This is all the warmth I need, Joe," he teased gently, and I found

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myself perplexed by his actions, trying to make sense of the sudden closeness between us. I didn't want to read him wrongly.

He eventually pulled away, looking deeply into my eyes, and I searched his gaze for understanding, seeking clarity in the midst of the unexpected moment.

"Are you alright, Li?" I asked, my voice almost breathless, and I noticed his eyes briefly flicker from my eyes to my lips. He drew closer, and I stood there, waiting to see what he would do. My wolf was eager, and so was I. Was he going to kiss me? Was this real, or was I merely dreaming?

Just as we were on the verge of sharing a potentially magical moment, a siren blared nearby, indicating something was amiss. The abrupt interruption stole the moment from us, leaving us both momentarily disoriented.

Shaking off the spell, we swam out of the water. I had to remove my wet underwear and change into my dry clothes, and I noticed that Liam did the same. As much as I appreciated the situation demanding my assistance, I couldn't help but feel a tinge of frustration that the siren had robbed us of that special moment.



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