

14 Drafting

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~Josephine~

I wasn't particularly enthusiastic about going to Mountain at first, until my father informed us that one of us would be assisting Justin in investigating the mysterious circumstances surrounding Mike Maguire. I had briefly met the man during a visit to Lady Stephanie and her husband in Grizlo, but I hadn't paid much attention to him. Apart from his daughter's close relationship with Liam, he was just an ordinary person to me. However, upon discovering that he had committed familicide and disappeared, I wouldn't be honest if I said I wasn't intrigued.

A few months had passed since our graduation, and we hadn't encountered any significant challenges. I was certain that this opportunity would be enjoyable. Moreover, I eagerly anticipated working alongside Justin on this case. He was a fun and cool person to be around. Unlike others, he didn't become uncomfortable in my presence, which made our interactions much smoother. He displayed a protective nature, akin to that of a brother, despite us not being related. I hoped they would choose me to assist Justin in the investigation in Grizlo, as working with him promised to be an enjoyable experience.

During the dinner held at Albert's mansion, I couldn't help but notice Liam's discomfort as he continuously glanced in my direction. I was aware that the situation involving Sophia had affected him, but I never anticipated it would make him lose control the way he did. Throughout the meal, he seemed almost entranced, drifting off

during conversations with Luis and stealing occasional glances at me. It was as if he didn't want me to interact with his cousin. Regardless of Justin's relation to him, I believed I had the right to engage with anyone. I hadn't done anything to warrant his behaviour, making it completely unwarranted.

Interestingly enough, Liam even forgot that we had graduated until Luis reminded him, despite being supposedly close family friends. It made me question whether the Volkovs truly believed the world revolved around them. I couldn't help but wonder what challenges lay ahead when Liam ascended to the throne. While Sebastien, Noah, and Ethan might not face any issues since their father is Liam's uncle, and they are technically his cousins, I doubted that I would be warmly embraced within that circle, particularly as the one he had labelled as the "weirdo."

After dinner, I made an attempt to talk to Liam about the mission. I knew he was the one who had caught the King's interest in the matter. It was evident that Sophia played a significant role, and although I found it biased, I understood her importance as the crown prince's friend.

To my surprise, I discovered that Liam and Sophia weren't dating yet. I had nothing against Sophia personally, but their potential romantic pairing didn't quite feel right to me. In my opinion, Liam and Sophia were better off as friends, but who was I to judge?

"It still isn't," Onyx, my wolf, remarked within my thoughts. She had been acting strangely since we entered the dining room, and even she couldn't explain why.

I settled onto the couch, observing everyone's laughter and enjoyment. Marvin and Miles were engaged in conversation with the Corrigan sisters, while Elaine seemed engrossed in her discussion with Oliver. Luis, on the other hand, was talking to Harper and Lilly, and I suspected Eleanor Sidorov was the topic of conversation. My brother had an infatuation with her. Just because our parents were close didn't mean we had to be together, but it seemed like fate might have different plans in store.

Charlotte, as usual, was chatting with her sisters, while Justin kept them company. I should have been part of that circle, but I couldn't shake off the tingling sensation that lingered after Liam's hand briefly touched mine as we made our way to the living room. Moreover, he had asked me a peculiar question about dill, which struck me as odd.

Despite Liam being eighteen, I was not yet of the same age, which meant there couldn't be any mate pull between us. In fact, I highly doubted that the moon would ever connect us. We had absolutely nothing in common, and Liam's intense focus on Sophia made it clear that they were destined to be mates in the future. Furthermore, I knew deep down that I wasn't his type. I learned that in a rather harsh way, and it stung a bit because I used to have a crush on him.

To be honest, that crush hadn't completely faded away. Liam was undeniably handsome, gentle, driven, and physically strong. However, he had never spared me a second glance. Elaine used to believe that sparks would fly between us, but it never materialised. As things grew more serious between Liam and Sophia, I chose to step back and let their relationship take its course. 1

Sitting on the couch, observing the lively atmosphere around me, I couldn't help but chuckle at my past self and the near-miss from two years ago. It was a memory that brought a mixture of pain and relief.

I had been just fifteen years old at the time, foolishly contemplating asking Liam out. Looking back, it was an embarrassing and naive notion. It had only been two years, but it felt like a lifetime ago.

We were all gathered at the Volkov estate, and it was Elaine who had encouraged me to approach Liam and confess my feelings. Reflecting on it now, I realised how foolish I had been. Liam was in the company of Marvin, Oliver, and Miles that day, and I wanted to seize the opportunity to approach him and request a private conversation. Even though Sophia was present as well, I stubbornly believed that I could somehow compete for his attention.

I pondered on the source of my courage back then, and I attributed it to Onyx, my newfound companion, as it was around that time that I had just acquired my wolf.

As I neared their conversation, I overheard Liam voicing his grievances about me. He had taken issue with my attitude, my choice of clothing, and even labeled me as arrogant. The sound of their laughter only intensified the negative emotions welling up inside me.

Miles even made a joke about my hair and eyeliner, and it stung deeply. I couldn't help but feel self-conscious about my eyes, which often appeared almost blind. Though they didn't explicitly mention it, I had a sinking feeling that I had missed a significant portion of their conversation. I had never realised they saw me in such a light until that moment.

In that instant, I made a swift decision to forget about the crush. Upon returning to Gad, I made it a point to trouble my mother about getting me contacts, feigning the excuse of poor eyesight. The optometrist saw through my ruse but kindly obliged, prescribing me contact lenses. Everyone assumed they were for medical purposes, but in reality, they were purely a fashion choice—a way to give people one less thing to gossip about.

I loved the boldness of my heavy eyeliner; it made my eyes stand out, and I could never bring myself to regret it. I refused to apologise for being intelligent or for coming across as unfriendly. Whether or not they were laughing about me, I didn't bother to find out. I retreated into myself, focusing on my own journey, and let go of that foolish crush.

"Hey, I noticed you were talking to Liam earlier. Why did he refuse to join us?" Jewels asked as she sat beside me.

I reminded her of the situation with Sophia and how Liam was struggling to cope. She nodded in understanding.

"Yeah, he's really going through a tough time. He hasn't taken it well at all. You should have seen him that day; he was absolutely devastated. He's convinced that she's being held captive on some remote island. Hopefully, our investigation in Grizlo will shed some light on the situation," she said with a hopeful smile, and I couldn't help but reciprocate.

"I thought maybe he got upset and left because he seemed so fixated on you during dinner," she said, her curiosity evident in her gaze. I hoped she wasn't trying to insinuate something because I was sure I

wasn't Liam's type.

"I guess my eyeliner captured his attention," I teased, and we shared a laugh.

"Everyone finds it fascinating, and you really know how to rock it," she complimented my artistic skills.

"It does look even better with your natural eye colour, though. I wish you didn't have to wear those lenses. You look just as beautiful as Aunty Amelia," she added, causing a slight blush to tint my cheeks. I never saw myself in that light, so her compliment was truly heartwarming.

"By the way, congratulations," she said to me, and I nodded. Our graduation had been relatively low-key due to the specialised classes we attended.

"Thank you, Jewels. So, what are your plans now?" I asked her, genuinely curious. She shrugged in response.

"I'm thinking of starting a business and maybe finding Mr. Right to settle down with," she replied with a hint of playfulness, causing me to laugh.

"And what about you?" she inquired, turning the question back to me.

"I'll likely join my father's ranks," I responded, and she gasped in surprise.

"But you're royalty!" she exclaimed, and I chuckled.

"So are you," I replied, reminding her of her own noble lineage. She

nodded in acknowledgement.

"Well, let's see how our work in Grizlo unfolds. Who knows, maybe you'll find your fated mate or meet someone along the way, settle down, and explore other possibilities," she teased, and I nodded, considering the possibilities.

Suddenly, I remembered the questions I had about Mike. Since Liam wasn't present, I figured I could approach Marvin, who was engrossed in a conversation with Layla. However, seeing their deep engagement, I realised it would be impolite to interrupt. I looked around, hoping to find someone else to talk to, but aside from Jewels, who seemed uninformed, there wasn't anyone readily available. I would likely have to wait until tomorrow to speak with Liam about Sophia and Mike.

Sebastien's announcement caught my attention, drawing me back to the present. It seemed we had been summoned to the lounge, likely concerning the Grizlo assignment since it appeared that most of us would be involved in it.

We all paused our activities and made our way to the lounge as a group. I followed behind, taking my place as the last person to arrive. Liam was already present, and there was an air of tension in the room that I couldn't quite comprehend. Uncle Leo appeared displeased, which only added to my confusion.

"I'm sure you're all aware of the Maguire case," Uncle Leo began, his voice carrying authority. "The incident involving the man who committed familicide," he clarified, and several of us nodded in recognition.

"Well, Prince Liam is determined to save his girlfriend, Sophia. He believes that she and her mother are being held captive by dangerous individuals who are using them as leverage to manipulate Mike. It may sound farfetched, but it's a plausible theory. While this isn't directly our business, Liam has made it our concern. In times of need, we stand united. And as your parents, we hope that you will do the same."

Uncle Leo's words resonated, and I realised that there was a select group being chosen to work on this case. While all of us might end up going to Grizlo, as it was likely the destination, only those directly involved in the investigation would have an active role.

The prospect of being excluded weighed on me, knowing that Liam would likely prefer to have Luis or Elaine join him rather than me. I had been eagerly looking forward to going to Grizlo and being part of the investigation, but if the decision lay with Liam, I knew he wouldn't choose me.

Lord Vino interrupted the silence by clearing his throat and commanding our attention. He spoke with a measured tone.

"When you go to Grizlo, your primary task is to investigate and observe. If the situation escalates to confrontation, you are not to engage. Instead, report back to us, and we will take it from there. While we would like to assist Liam in rescuing his friend and her mother, we are not willing to put our children in harm's way."

His words hung in the air, and my gaze instinctively turned to Liam, searching for any sign or reaction.

Liam appeared visibly uneasy, and I empathised with his position. If anything were to go wrong, he would likely shoulder the blame. However, our families were tightly connected, and it was inconceivable to leave the Volkovs to tackle this alone. Our bond required us to stand together, regardless of the risks involved.

My attention shifted to Queen Tamia, and her distress was evident. The weight of the situation, combined with the uncertainty surrounding it, made it even more challenging. If there was a way for our parents to handle it themselves, they would have done so. Unfortunately, their roles and positions didn't allow for such direct intervention.

"My beta will dispatch his team tomorrow to check the ports of Kaizen and Braille, conducting inquiries discreetly. We cannot simply storm into people's homes and conduct searches unless there is a clear and urgent need or a state of emergency is declared on those islands. At present, the best approach will be to circulate their pictures and offer rewards for any valuable information," Uncle Leo explained. His pragmatic approach acknowledged the limitations they faced, and it seemed like the most suitable course of action for the time being.

"The active team in Grizlo will consist of," Lord David began, capturing our full attention.

"Justin, as the temporary Alpha, Liam as the temporary Beta, Marvin as the temporary Gamma, Oliver as the temporary Delta, and Noah as the Epsilon. Josephine, Sebastien, and Charlotte, the three of you will work closely with them and assist in the investigation. The rest of

14 Drafting

you will join them in Grizlo after four months once they have settled into their respective roles. It's essential that all of you collaborate closely and uncover the truth behind what went wrong. Head Alpha Christian Zakharov has provided some documents for you to review."

As Lord David spoke, his gaze settled on me, and I felt a surge of both pride and pressure.

"Josephine, you possess exceptional intellect, and thus, you will lead the investigation. I would like you, Noah, and Sebastien to employ your brilliant minds to analyse the documents provided by the Alpha and develop theories. Report your findings to your respective Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, and Epsilon. In more serious cases, report directly to me," he instructed, and I nodded in acknowledgement.

Glancing towards my parents, I could sense their approval of the assigned roles. I couldn't help but feel a mix of excitement and anticipation, particularly knowing that Uncle Max and his family would be visiting soon. I hoped we wouldn't be required to depart before their arrival.

As I shifted my gaze towards Liam, it became clear that he was visibly uncomfortable with the fact that I was assigned to his team. I could sense his disapproval, but something within me urged me not to let it affect me. Regardless of his feelings, I knew that I had a role to fulfill and that I was capable of contributing to the investigation. It was unfortunate for him if he didn't like the arrangement, but he would simply have to come to terms with it.