

12 Something Unexpected

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~Liam~

The flight to Mountain proved to be uneventful, with our family occupying a private aircraft for the journey. True to form, Uncle Leo awaited our arrival at the airport, ready with five vans and security personnel to transport us to our destination.

I eagerly anticipated reuniting with Noah and Sebastien. It had been months since we last saw each other, back when we gathered at Lord Alexei's residence in Gad. If there was anyone capable of helping us navigate through Mountain, it was those two, especially Noah, whom we affectionately referred to as the "accidental Alpha."

Noah's unexpected alpha wolf came as a surprise since his mother was a Stepanov pure breed, and we didn't anticipate him inheriting alpha genes because of it. But to our astonishment, Noah wasn't only an Alpha but also embodied the full traits and abilities of the Stepanov lineage.

Sebastien also had the Stepanov abilities without their physical features. Their younger brother Ethan, on the other hand, stood as the sole delta among the brothers. Ethan looked mostly like their father, but he was a delta with Stepanov abilities.

To add to their family, they had an eccentric grand uncle who, in an unusual twist, also served as their grandfather by virtue of settling down with their mother's mother. It made for an intriguing blend of family dynamics.

Setting aside Sophia's ongoing predicament, being in the East felt invigorating, and I revelled in the experience.

Eager to avoid sitting with our parents, we hastily piled into one of the waiting vans. Beta Casper, already aware of our preference, had arranged a separate vehicle for our group. Marvin, Oliver, Miles, Lilly, Harper, the triplets, Justin, and I settled comfortably in the van, leaving our parents to find their own seating arrangements. Uncle Leo had arrived with an excess of vehicles, so it was expected that some would return empty.

As the van began its journey, Justin captured our attention with a noteworthy piece of information.

"Hey," he called out, directing his words towards Miles and Marvin.

"I heard that Alpha Devin and his children are currently staying at the mansion," It was clear he was addressing Miles and Marvin, who had severe crushes on the Corrigan sisters, Layla and Sarah.

I had to give credit to my cousins; they certainly had an eye for beauty.

The Corrigan sisters were truly stunning, bearing a striking resemblance to our Aunt Amelia. It was difficult to articulate, but it seemed my cousins had a penchant for Stepanov women. I was well aware of Oliver's infatuation with Elaine Kuznetsov. Given the opportunity, I was certain he would jump at the chance to visit Gad, where Elaine resided.

However, Elaine had a spirited sister named Josephine Kuznetsov,

and our interactions were far from pleasant.

We constantly clashed and couldn't stand each other's presence. In fact, there were times when I actively went out of my way to avoid her.

Josephine was headstrong, stubborn, and resolute in her own ways. It seemed we were perpetually at odds.

Despite being slightly younger than me by a year and a few months, I couldn't envision us ever becoming friends. 1

She was wild and unyielding, and I could continue listing her characteristics. Fortunately, the sisters would reach the age of eighteen next year, and with any luck, they would find their destined mates, allowing my cousin to move forward.

"Oh, will there be some sparks?" Jewels playfully teased Miles and Marvin, and I could swear I saw Marvin's cheeks flush with colour. It was evident that he had strong feelings for Layla Corrigan, even more so than I had realised. It was a shame that they would have to wait until the end of next year to determine if they were fated to be together. I genuinely hoped that fate would be on their side.

Observing the expressions on my cousins' faces as we made our way towards the Mountain settlement made me realise how self-centred I had been when I insisted on heading to Grizlo. I had unintentionally hindered their own desires by asking them to assist me in pursuing mine. I knew how much we had all been looking forward to visiting Mountain, and I felt a sense of guilt and remorse for my decision.

I had spent considerable time reflecting on Justin's words, and they resonated deeply with me. Although I hadn't personally experienced

the challenges Uncle Leo and my mother faced, I could only imagine the turmoil they endured. They were fortunate to have been granted second chances in love. Yet, I couldn't help but ponder what might have happened if their stories hadn't unfolded so positively. The unsettling thought troubled me greatly and ultimately led me to a resolution.

I made the decision to persist in my search for Sophia. I wouldn't give up on finding her. However, I also realised the importance of preparing my mindset in the event that we encounter our fated mates along the way. I wasn't certain of the exact approach or how I would accomplish this mental preparation, but I remained hopeful that it wouldn't prove too arduous a task.

Upon our arrival at the mansion, it became evident that Uncle Leo had made significant modifications and expansions to the property over the years. The building now surpassed its original size, leading me to believe that it might continue to grow in the future.

The van came to a stop in front of the entrance, and we exited one by one. Aunty Amelia stood at the entrance, as she always did, ready to welcome us with open arms. Time seemed to have no effect on her, and her distinctive eyes remained unchanged.

"Liam," she greeted, pulling me into a warm embrace. Moments later, she extended the same affection to Harper, drawing us all into a big, heartfelt hug with the rest of the family.

As our parents received their own warm welcome from Aunty Amelia, we made our way inside. Familiar with the mansion, we each knew our designated rooms. Miles, Oliver, Marvin, and I typically shared

one room, while Lily, Harper, and the triplets occupied another. Eleanor had expressed a desire to join us, but Uncle Marcel had enrolled her in Lucland Academy since her return to Grizlo wasn't imminent. She only had two more years to complete her studies, and my mother had taken the opportunity to drop her off at the academy along with my brothers.

As we ascended the stairs to our designated wing, we unexpectedly crossed paths with the Corrigan sisters. They had noticeably grown since our last encounter, which was only a few months ago.

"Hey, Li, Miles, Oliver, Marvin," Layla greeted us warmly, her smile radiating. She glanced at each of us but seemed to focus on Marvin, who became momentarily flustered. In his attempt to wave while still clutching his bag, he ended up dropping what he was carrying. It was no secret that Marvin tended to be a bit flustered whenever Layla was around.

"Hi," Miles greeted Sarah with a casual air, as if she were the only person in the room. Leaving Marvin and Layla engrossed in their own little world, Oliver and I hurried past them, making our way to our room. I couldn't help but look forward to teasing them about their interaction when they returned. Their response to our playful banter never failed to amuse us.

"Did you see Marvin?" Oliver chuckled, his laughter contagious as I placed my bag in the closet.

"Just like you are when you see Elaine. I don't know what it is with you guys and the Stepanovs," I replied, joining in the laughter.

"They're undeniably beautiful, Li. You can't deny that. We always

thought you might have a soft spot for Josephine, but she's quite the handful—too much for your serious mind to handle. Besides, you've been preoccupied with Sophia to notice anyone else. I just hope we're able to find her," Oliver said, his tone shifting as we both grew serious.

I could tell he was treading carefully, delicately skirting around the subject. I gave his back a reassuring pat and took a seat, our smiles fading as we contemplated the weight of our mission.

"We're here to have fun and conduct our investigation. Don't let my mood dampen yours. We'll make the most of our time here, and I already mentioned the phone call to you. Sophia assured us that they wouldn't harm them. I highly doubt Mike would allow it. We need to stay optimistic, but at the same time, we shouldn't let our current joy be overshadowed," I reassured Oliver, emphasising the importance of maintaining a positive outlook. He nodded in agreement.

"Do you think the Kuznetsovs will be joining us? Aunt Amelia usually invites everyone when it's her turn," Oliver asked, his cheeks blushing slightly as he expressed his eagerness to see Elaine.

"Well, for your sake, I hope she does. It would be a shame to see Miles and Marvin having a great time with Sarah and Layla while you're left alone. You know Aunt Nicole is hoping that Justin might meet someone here," I interjected, attempting to divert the topic. Oliver nodded, joining in the laughter, and we both shifted our focus to the potential enjoyment that awaited us at the gathering.

"I wouldn't want to be in his shoes right now. Honestly, she is hands-on. I heard my mother saying Aunt Nicole plans to start organising

balls for Justin. 'Speaking of prince charming and the lucky girl'. I am sure all the young unmated women will overrun the place. I hope he finds a way to convince her not to do so. It kind of sucks not knowing someone is your mate until they, too, come of age. I think the moon allows you to cross paths with them. Hopefully, Justin will, and Aunty Nicole can rest," he said. I really hoped so, too, because Aunty Nicole had put a lot of hope and effort into finding Justin his mate.

Noah and Sebastien joined us in the room, and their presence brought me immense relief. It was evident that they weren't aware of the situation I was facing, but we refrained from discussing it directly. I wanted to ensure that I had fully settled myself before delving into those matters.

However, I had no doubt that Noah and Sebastien would be there to support me. Despite the two-year age gap between us, they were incredibly resourceful individuals, especially Noah. He seemed to have his finger on the pulse of everything, and Uncle Leo had his hands full when it came to parenting Noah. With their energy and enthusiasm, I knew they would be instrumental in helping me navigate through this challenging time. Kaizen and Braille will be a breeze for them.

Noah and Sebastien were set to graduate in just two months. Their remarkable intellect had earned them double promotions twice, placing them in the same academic year as us. They were my cousins and held a closer bond with me than Marvin, Miles, and Oliver.

Their stay in our room was brief, as they had other engagements. I

made a mental note to catch up with them later, as I knew their insights and support would be invaluable.

After freshening up, my father contacted us to inform us that we would be having dinner separately from our parents. Apparently, the reason was that their dining room couldn't accommodate all of us. I couldn't help but feel relieved by this arrangement. Eating with our parents often felt dull and overly formal, with them holding all the enjoyment while we merely observed and adhered to proper behaviour. Now, at least, we could have a good time amongst ourselves without a chaperone. I suspected that this change was due to most of us having turned eighteen. However, I held hope that Justin would join us for dinner. He was just as enjoyable to be around, much like his father.

Miles and Marvin finally entered the room, and Oliver and I decided to let the issue concerning the Corrigan sisters slide for now.

Considering the time it took for them to return, it seemed apparent that whatever was transpiring between them was mutually agreed upon. I resolved to give them the necessary space and address the matter later when the time was right.

We proceeded to dress for dinner and made our way to the smaller dining room.

The Corrigans were already present, alongside the rest of our group. Although I was initially designated to sit at the head of the table, I asked Justin to take that position as a gesture of honour while I took the seat next to him on the right.

As we settled into our places, I couldn't help but notice that we were

waiting for something. Curiosity getting the better of me, I leaned towards Justin and inquired about the delay in serving the food.

"The Kuznetsovs arrived about thirty minutes ago. We're waiting for Josephine and her sisters to join us," Justin informed, his gaze directed at Oliver.

Instantly, laughter erupted throughout the room as we all understood the implications behind that look.

I couldn't help but anticipate the awkwardness that would ensue. As we were no longer mere students, it was crucial for each of us to contemplate our own futures. While I pursued my search for Sophia, my cousins had their own aspirations within their grasp, and I hoped they wouldn't let those opportunities slip away.

While we waited for the Kuznetsovs to join us, I caught a distinct and captivating scent wafting from the doorway. It was subtle but alluring, reminiscent of dill. The fragrance lingered momentarily, yet it was undeniably present.

My gaze turned towards the source of the scent, and there she was—Josephine Kuznetsov, accompanied by her sisters.

As always, she exuded an air of aloofness with her dark eyeliner and a subtle hint of gothic fashion. Yet, there was something different about her this time. I couldn't quite put my finger on it and didn't wish to dwell on it. I redirected my attention to my plate, allowing them to settle in comfortably. Alex, my wolf, seemed restless, and I couldn't help but wonder what had just happened to me. 1