

344 First Sleepover

Hades 1

My son's smile was so wide as he stared at himself in the mirror, it could've lit the entire tower. The tail was sequined, the fur white velvet, and splashes of glittery color ran across the onesie like someone had melted a rainbow in a candy factory. His little hood—complete with floppy ears and a golden unicorn horn—kept slipping over his eyes, but he didn't care. He just kept grinning.

The uniform onesie was... bold. Blinding, even. 3

Elliot turned to me, cheeks flushed with excitement, his hands clapping together as he bounced once, then twice—

And then he screamed.

"We're matching!!" 4

His voice echoed through the corridor with glee, and I felt Eve freeze beside me. 1

I looked down at myself.



Yes. Yes, we were.

Somehow, through the treacheries of childlike manipulation and Eve's complete betrayal of my dignity, I had allowed myself to be zipped into a full-grown version of the monstrosity Elliot now wore. 2

White velvet. Sequins. A glitter-drenched horn drooping tragically over one eye.

My soul died a little.

But Elliot was practically vibrating with joy. And Eve—Eve—was laughing. Her head tilted back, the sound rich and soft as she stood in her own matching onesie, looking like the least-threatening mythical creature I'd ever seen.

I couldn't even pretend to be annoyed.

I found I was not in the slightest. I touched my chest, unsure why I was not dreary after everything

We were all laughing now.

It wasn't polished.



But it was real.

Earlier today, Elliot had crept up to us—quiet, hesitant, twirling the cuff of his sleeve with nervous fingers. "Can I... Can I sleep in your room tonight? With both of you?" he'd asked. "I want my first sleepover..."

That one sentence had leveled me harder than any battlefield ever had.

So now we stood, three unicorns in a dim corridor lit by soft sconces and shared laughter.

Elliot reached for Eve's hand with one of his, and mine with the other.

His palms were a little clammy. And mine, truthfully, weren't any steadier. But he didn't flinch this time. He didn't retreat when I curled my fingers gently around his. His grip was small but certain, like he was trying to hold us all together by sheer will alone.

We walked toward the room in silence at first—Eve humming some song under her breath, her thumb brushing slow, calming circles on the back of Elliot's hand. I didn't know what to say. There were words I could have offered—soft,



warm, fatherly things—but they caught in my throat every time I tried.

It wasn't perfect.

But it was something.

Once we reached the doorway, Elliot let go and scrambled toward the bed, climbing up with an almost frantic energy that spoke louder than anything he could've said aloud. His fingers fumbled with something under the pillows.

Then he turned around and held it up.

A crumpled sheet of paper. Folded. Unfolded. Refolded. Handled too many times.

"A list," he mumbled. "Of stuff... for tonight. I planned it."

He laid it out carefully between us on the bed, smoothing the wrinkles as if it were made of gold.

It wasn't words—it was drawings. Stick figures, little doodles, squiggles with arrows pointing in strange directions. The first was a blurry unicorn doing what might have been a cartwheel. The next was a crooked bowl with



little hearts floating above it. And the third... was just a big smiley face labeled "sleep 2gether."

Eve's hand went to her mouth, trying to hide the grin. Mine went to the list.

"You drew all this?" I asked softly.

He nodded, suddenly shy. "I thought... if we followed it, then maybe... I'd sleep better."

It broke me. Just a little.

"What's this one?" I pointed at the bowl.

His eyes lit up. "My favourite food."

My smile fell, I didn't know what it was. I didn't know my son's favourite food.

He must have sensed my pain because he smiled wider but whispered. "It's Pudding."

I blinked. "Pudding?"

He nodded harder. "The kind grandma used to make. With the cinnamon. And the funny raisins. Mama used to let me eat it whenever i came but not too much so i don't get chubby."

My heart stopped and broke.



He looked right at me. "It's your favorite too, right?"

I swallowed hard.

It was.

It always had been.

And I hadn't had it since my first day in the black room.

I nodded slowly, voice thick. "Yeah. It is."

Elliot didn't smile, not fully. But there was a flicker of pride in his eyes, like he'd just gotten something important right.

"I want us to eat it together," he said.

Eve reached out and brushed a stray curl from his forehead, her expression unreadable. Quiet. But I saw the wet sheen in her eyes. I felt my throat close again. I wanted to reach across and touch her but I was not sure I had the right or was worthy of her skin.

I shook away the longing like i had been doing for what felt like a lifetime. "I think," I said slowly, "we can make that happen."



"Yeah?" Elliot asked, almost suspicious.

"Yeah." I cleared my throat and forced a smile.

"But you're making the raisins. That's the rule."

Elliot wrinkled his nose. "I hate raisins."

"Exactly."

He gave a snort—more breath than laughter, but it was real.

Then came the awkward bit.

"So, um..." He scratched his cheek, eyes on the floor. "How do we sleep? Like... do I go in the middle? Or do I take the side? Or... do I get my own bed?"

I looked at Eve. She looked at me.

There wasn't a rehearsed answer for that.

"You pick," she said softly, settling down beside him.

He hesitated, then scooted over and threw himself between us like a bridge—arms outstretched, a unicorn plushie tucked under his chin.



"Okay," he whispered. "But if I wake up, you guys have to still be here. Promise?"

My chest cracked a little more.

I nodded. "Promise."

The lights were low, the air warm, the room filled with the faint scent of cinnamon and sugar. The pudding had just come out of the warmer—Eve had insisted on recreating the exact texture. Elliot had stirred the pot like a tiny soldier on a mission, furrowing his brows every time a raisin floated to the top.

"I'm watching you," he'd whispered to one particularly smug raisin before spooning it into a bowl with exaggerated precision.

Now, the three of us were curled on the bed, unicorn hoods still half-on, bowls in hand. Elliot's feet were tucked beneath a throw blanket, the plushie trapped protectively in the crook of his arm as he took another bite and let out a loud, contented sigh.

"This is perfect," he declared. "Not just the pudding. Everything."



I swallowed hard and nodded, keeping my eyes on the bowl. The spoon felt small in my hand. Heavy.

Across from me, Eve nudged Elliot's side gently. "You know what we forgot?" she whispered like it was the world's best-kept secret.

"What?" he whispered back, eyes wide.

"The unicorn oath."

He gasped. "We forgot?!"

"It's not too late," she said, glancing at me with a barely contained smirk.

I blinked. "There's a... unicorn oath?"

Elliot nodded solemnly, clearly making it up on the spot. "It goes: no bedtime fear, no pudding wasted, and no sad faces allowed." 1

I arched a brow. "That sounds like a cult." 1

Eve giggled. "Shh. We don't say the C-word."

They burst into a fit of hushed laughter, the kind that only came when joy felt like rebellion. I tried to smirk, but the weight in my chest lingered.

It was too good. Too light. Too much.

I didn't know how to be in it.

"Why are you staring like that?" Eve asked, still smiling as she tilted her head.

"I'm not staring."

"You are." Elliot chimed in with pudding stuffed in his cheek. "You're doing the face."

"What face?"

"The one that says I forgot how to smile but I'm trying really hard not to let anyone know."

I coughed. "That is... oddly specific."

They exchanged another glance.

Then Elliot looked at me, eyes glittering. "You got pudding on your chin."

I blinked, looked down. "What—?"

Too late.

Eve leaned forward, her thumb brushing under my jaw with casual familiarity.

But this time—this time I caught her wrist before



she could pull away.

Her eyes met mine, startled.

Just a heartbeat.

I didn't squeeze. I didn't hold her like I used to. I just... touched. As if I was asking a question I didn't know how to phrase.

Her breath hitched.

Then she gently pulled back.

Not coldly.

Just... still drawing boundaries.

The space between us closed, and reopened.

I dropped my gaze and let go.

She returned to her pudding. I returned to pretending mine tasted like something.

It wasn't rejection. Not really.

But it stung in a place I didn't know I still had hope in.

Elliot, unaware of the undertow between us, licked his spoon clean and leaned back against



the pillows. His lids drooped.

And then—he bolted upright.

"Oh! Wait!"

He shoved his bowl toward the nightstand, scrambled across Eve's lap, and yanked something from his little backpack.

A sketchbook.

He flipped through it rapidly, then held up a page. "Look!"

It was a drawing of three unicorns. Crooked. Brightly colored. One was very tall with what I guessed were tired eyebrows. Another had a sparkly tail (Eve, obviously). And the smallest one had stars drawn around it and an enormous smile.

"Us," he whispered. "Tonight."

I reached out to steady the page. The paper shook in his grip.

"You did this?" I asked.

He nodded, voice quieter now. "I... I thought maybe... if I drew it... it'd really happen."



He looked up at me, vulnerable and proud all at once.

"It did," I said, voice rough.

He smiled. Then yawned so hard his whole body rocked.

Eve took the sketchbook and set it aside. "Come here," she murmured.

He crawled between us, curled up, and pulled the blanket to his chin. "If I have a nightmare... will you wake me up?"

"I'll do one better," I said. "I'll chase it down and throw pudding at it."

He gave a sleepy snort. "That's not how pudding works."

"Pudding works in mysterious ways," I muttered, and heard Eve laugh softly.

He drifted off between us, his breath evening out.

I was content to sit in the hush, eyes half-closed, when Eve moved again.

Quietly. Carefully.



She reached across him, took my chin with her fingers—and wiped something gently from the corner of my mouth.

"Missed a spot," she said, voice playful and low.

I froze.

Then she lifted her thumb to her lips and licked it clean.

"Mmm," she murmured.

I stared at her, blinking slowly.

She met my gaze, eyes warm and glinting under the faint glow of the bedside lamp.

There it was.

The first crack in her wall.

My chest went light. Too light. Like I might float out of my skin.

I didn't reach for her. I smiled.

And when she smiled back...

I felt it. Peace.

And just maybe... home.

< 344 First Sleepover

I was home. 1

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