

## Chapter 33

In the kingdom the next day, Enora held a yellow sheet as she leaped into her uncle's ready arms that hoisted her up. Her tiny arms wrapped around his neck and squeezed tight as his other niece and nephew gave him hello hugs at his legs. Gently patting Reida on her head and ruffling Ken's hair, he then turned his attention to his favorite. "What do you have here, sweetheart?"

He reached for the sheet blocking his peripheral view, his thumb smoothed the crumpled side where Enora's fist was, holding the flier further from his face to make out the big, black words.

Enora's grip loosened when she asked with doe eyes, "Will you come, Uncle Gweg?"

It was about the archery competition she signed up for. Leaving a quick kiss on her temple, he conveyed the date and time to memory. "Of course, sweetheart. Wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Yay!" Her arms shot to the sky as her uncle beamed brighter than the afternoon sun. So much energy and life inside such a small creature.

On the drive back, the three pups filled him in on their week almost all at once.

There was a time when he and his animal would growl to silence a room, but this was not such a time, despite it being a little challenging to drive while listening to all three - sometimes varying versions - of a tale. His animal "offered" to listen to Enora, asking his human to take the other two. It was a good thing pups were repetitive. By the time they reached the villa, Greg had heard their top tales of the week at least twice.

As the pups in the backseat went on their usual race to the front door, Greg unbuckled Enora and got her out as she rambled on about Lionel MacDonald being kept a close eye on by every teacher and almost stole another pup's paintbrush but was caught by Hailey before he even left their classmate's desk.

At the door, Greg set Enora on her feet but she held onto his sleeve and asked whether they could go to the park. It was not an innocent request. If trips to ponds meant assaulting ducks, those to the park meant catapulting nests out of trees. Greg had a few nests made and planted them in trees on their last playdate just so she wouldn't go after the real ones. They were still in a box in the boot of his car.

Greg looked to his cousin and cousin-in-law for an answer.

Doe eyes on her mother, despite knowing its ineffectiveness, the pup begged, "Mommy, pweez?"

Enora had been explicitly informed that she would only have one playdate a week instead of two - on a Saturday - with Uncle Greg if she misbehaved in school while he was gone. Only now did the pup regret the shot to Lionel MacDonald's nape. She knew her father wasn't mad at her for doing it. But her mother was a different story.

Enora didn't get a lecture, only being told by Lucy - in controlled calmness - to tell her teachers or parents these things instead of taking matters into her own hands. But the pup was convinced that it wasn't her father's warmth - but her mother's raging heat - that was melting the ice-cream that night.

Lucy was mad, but only a small portion of the fury was toward her daughter. Some of it was frustration at her husband and his cousins, and a large chunk of it was for not knowing what to do. It didn't help when her own father sided with her pup and encouraged her to use her royal prerogative to get Lionel MacDonald expelled, and she had to tell

the old man that wasn't what the prerogative was for.

Looking at Enora now, Lucy sighed and uttered, "After lunch and homework. And only one hour this time. For dragging Ianne into your schemes this week."

Enora only understood the first half of the decision and it lit her up like a lantern as she jumped in jubilation. She and Greg normally had two hours but an hour was better than nothing, she decided. Finally letting go of Greg's sleeve and saying she'd see him later, Enora obediently disappeared into the dining room where Mrs. Parker was with her siblings, and her parents sat her uncle in the living room. Greg declined lunch because he'd already grabbed a quick bite before picking up the pups.

Lucy began, "The first week has been... surprisingly eventful."

Greg scoffed. "Alagumalai would've preferred the opposite, as would the rest of the octopuses, I gather."

Lucy's brows rose at Sush's last name, Xandar's own knitted as his wife questioned, "Are you really calling her that, or is it only because you're now with us, Greg?"

"I normally call her 'Chief.'"

"Really?" Lucy questioned with an amused smile of disbelief, her husband swallowing a chuckle as he willed his lips to stay as flat as possible.

Greg shot his cousin a glare when he responded to Lucy, "One experience with a huntress is enough, my queen. Let's not think I'm there for anything more than business." Even as he said it, he felt the nudge in his chest, then a prick, one that told the rest of him that it was not the complete truth.

A truth that even Lucy knew about. "Well, I didn't expect you to be there

for anything more than that either but things can happen in these business ventures. Besides, I can't say the glow you brought home today doesn't suit you."

"That..." Greg interjected, flushing just slightly. "...is because of the pups."

"Hm, sure," Lucy hummed, calling out his bluff without calling out his bluff.

Xandar, as if Greg wasn't still in the same room, turned to Lucy and uttered softly and gently, "You know, they do complement each other. The temper, the brains, the stealth. Even the impatience, I think."

With a hand on his lap, Lucy corrected in an affectionate whisper, "Darling, you're forgetting their tempers simmer away when they're around each other. Ella said it's the only time Sush smiles. And we know your cousin. Who have you seen him smile around other than Enora?"

"Hold up. You planted Tristan to keep tabs on me?" Greg queried.

Their smiles faltered as heads turned to Greg when Xandar said, "If we wanted to do that, Greg, we would've sent the warriors, not rely on someone who's pledged loyalty to the Service."

"Ella has been concerned," Lucy began. "And Toby and I talk. Often."

Greg insisted, "Nothing is happening." And his insides cracked at the admission, that truth. Things were happening, and then it just stopped.

"We know," Lucy said, almost sadly, thinking back to Toby's most recent gossip report that Sush and Greg hadn't been speaking to each other before Greg returned to the kingdom. Lucy shrugged. "Letting go does take time. I just hope the one you'll eventually choose would be available when you're ready. No rush, though, Greg. Wounds take time to heal."

"I won't pursue a huntress, my queen." As much as he wanted to. "Their

kind brings more trouble than it's worth."

"Do you really think that?" Lucy questioned, planting a seed of doubt in his mind. "The woman who posed a danger to our family has never been the epitome of a huntress, never even possessed the fundamental qualities that profession represents, almost as if she only qualified because of the mark on her nape. Not every huntress is like her. You've met many of them by now. Are all of them like her? Is anyone like her at all?"



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