

## Chapter 75

Greg wasn't sure. He was definitely sure how he felt about Sush, but he wasn't sure if those feelings would be accepted by his little sweetheart. Still, he wanted to give this a chance.

Sush was more nervous about meeting the pup than she was about meeting the other octopuses on her first day as a hunter-in-training. She unpacked her clothes the previous day and had been going through her options so long that she and Greg didn't have time for sex.

Greg was on his routined call with Enora as he watched Sush swap one shirt for another on the bed, pondered, then swapped the pants for another pair of pants. Brows arched deep like she was trying to crack a code, she then brought the shoes she intended to wear and placed them at the foot of the bed, then swapped the shirt again.

Enora excitedly told Greg that she wanted to share a secret with him the next day. At the end of briefing her uncle on her day, she then asked about his day, and he had to clear his throat before admitting he was bringing someone to her archery competition.

The mood shift was quick, silence permeated the line until Greg asked if she was alright. Sounding like she was on the verge of tears, Enora asked if he'd "found" Ugly Deli and was bringing back that woman.

Restraining himself from saying that Ugly Deli was most likely next to the thrown out teddy bear in

some dump site, or had already gone through the recycling and came out as a new product, Greg fervently denied that Izabella was ever coming back. Again. He made a mental note to ask the queen for the appropriate age to explain death to the pup.

Though sounding less upset, Enora was nonetheless skeptical, her earlier eagerness to see him the next day was now fogged with conflict. And it was the first time Lucy didn't have to remind her about needing to hang up for bedtime. She tried to sound normal when she bid her uncle goodnight, but a pup's acting could only go so far.

Greg linked the queen right after, practically confessing to upsetting Enora. Lucy assured him that she and Xandar would take care of it.

At the dining table, Enora numbly welcomed the apple and pomegranate flavored ice-cream her father was bringing to her mouth as she sat on his lap, eyes downcast, facing her tiny hands on Xandar's much larger one as her mind wandered. Her parents repeatedly told her that it wasn't going to be Izabella, and suggested she might feel differently about her uncle's mystery guest.

Ken climbed out of bed when he found the lights in the corridor still on and followed the scent of his mother to the kitchen. His eyes zoned in on the ice-cream going into his sister's mouth, feeling something akin to injustice and abandonment until his mother's voice rang through his ears, "Chocolate chip and walnut, muffin?"

Ken beamed at his pet name born out of his mother's severe muffin cravings when she carried him and Enora, leaving the other less severe craving/

nickname - cookie - for Enora.

"Yes please, mommy." He grinned and dawdled across the room as Lucy got out the tub of Ken's favorite ice-cream, getting a scoop and putting it into a bowl before seating him on her lap as he took the wooden spoon and rushed through the cold, creamy dessert.

Reida came next, frightened by the thunder that came out of nowhere outside her window before rain fell. The eldest princess would normally go to her parents room and climb on her father's side of the bed if she needed to feel safe, but like her brother, her nose led her to the kitchen and Xandar got out the peppermint and blueberry tub, repeating the process in another bowl, planting his eldest on the other side of his lap, holding his girls like a proud father.

The pups rambled on about school and classmates when Enora murmured that their uncle was bringing a stranger. Reida choked and Ken dropped his spoon. A modicum of relief entered the youngest pup's eyes when her siblings shared her pessimism, her mother getting her sister a glass of water. Only when the choking stop did the room mellow from its panicked state.

Before any debate, discussion or argument could unfold, Xandar hastily placed Enora on his shoulders, put Reida on her feet, dropped the empty bowls into the sink, specifically asking Lucy to leave it and that he'd clean them up in the morning and said to their pups, "It's late. Time for bed. We have a big day tomorrow." Looking up, he held his youngest's gaze when he asked, "Don't we, cookie?"

Enora mm-ed and managed a smile, eyes droopy as her head leaned into her father's hair when he brought her and Reida to bed.

Ken stayed behind to wipe the ice-cream stains off the floor with Lucy, then admired the clean floor with a proud smile as his mother washed the bowls and spoons, holding her hand afterward as she flipped off the lights and walked him to his room, tucking him into bed and kissing him goodnight again, leaving when his father's figure appeared at the door.

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The skepticism remained even in the morning. The pups began wondering what Sush would look like, whether she'd be as creepy as "that woman" and whether her fingers would be as cold.


Lucy sighed, meeting Xandar's concerned gaze, and instead of telling her children to "be nice" like she did with Izabella, she said, "Be honest with your uncle about his guest, but also remember to be fair and be kind."

"Yes, Mommy," the pups chorused, albeit reluctantly.

If Enora had it her way, she wouldn't want to meet anyone new at all. So when she saw her uncle at the kindergarten archery range with a brown-skinned woman, she surprised herself when curiosity flickered through her in a way that never happened with Ugly Deli.

Her uncle's open arms and squatted posture brought a smile to her face as she ran and hopped into his embrace, hands wrapped around his neck as he hoisted her off the ground.

Chapter 75

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Sush's anxiety was reduced by the sight before her - of a man normally so brooding and cold now breaking into a smile as he pressed a kiss to the little girl's hair while asking the pup in a conspiratorial whisper, "What's the secret, sweetheart? I couldn't sleep last night thinking about it."



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