

Chapter 76

Enora grinned, showing her incomplete set of teeth when her arms shot to the sky and she exclaimed, "Lionel MacDonald changed schools! Yay!"

"Enora, pipe down," Lucy reprimanded, trying not to make eye contact with any of the parents looking at her daughter either in bewilderment due to their unfamiliarity with her classmate's name, or in amusement because their own pup had been victims to Lionel's misbehavior as well.

Another pup not far away even threw his own arms up in the air and exclaimed "yay!" at Enora's announcement, even though he'd already celebrated the day before when their class was told the news. Only then did Lucy have the courage to meet the other set of parents' sheepish gaze and smile.

"Hello, Sush. Glad you could make it," Lucy welcomed her with a smile, needing a desperate change of subject before her pup got carried away.

"Lucy, hi." Sush pushed a smile that hopefully matched hers.

The utterance of her first name sent a very specific signal, and the queen's mouth which gaped for a moment morphed into a smile when her eyes locked with Greg's smiling ones.

Turning to Xandar, Christian and Annie, Sush greeted, "Your Majesty. Your Graces." The three greeted her with warm smiles.

"Blackfurs," Greg uttered their way with a curt nod, which Annie responded with a cordial lift of her lips and Christian with a similar nod without a word, lips pulled back into a tight line.

Alissa, Desmond, Hailey, and Ivory were there too, carefully stepping into the circle, greeting their boss and acknowledging what many of

their colleagues in hunters headquarters suspected would be the new duchess who was - in their comrades' words - less pretentious, more daunting, more intelligent and easier to read.

Enora stole everyone's attention when she asked, "Is this your new friend, Uncle Gweg?"

Bringing her closer to Sush, he kept his anxiety to himself when he said, "Yes, her name's Sush."

Enora's head cocked. "Like Japanese food?"

It was on the tip of his tongue to say Sush tasted better than any food, and he had to physically swallow before replying, "Well, almost. And you want to know something else, sweetheart?"

Her eyes stayed on Sush when she hummed, "Mm-hm?"

"She shoots arrows, too," Greg whispered like it was a secret shared only with her.

Enora's head spun to him and he could see a whole galaxy of stars behind the lilac orbs when she asked excitedly, "Weally?"

"Yeah, ask her." His chin gestured Sush's way, bringing Enora even closer when his niece looked like she was trying to climb over him to get a better look at his octopus.

The girl's face leveled with the woman's. Enora blinked a few times, studying Sush just as she scrutinized any stranger on a first meeting, conveying the woman's features to memory, forgetting that she was supposed to ask her a question. Then, her small hand reached out and gingerly landed on Sush's nose before the pup beamed and said, "You're pwetty."

Sush's brows shot to her hair. She couldn't remember the last time someone said she was pretty. People normally told her she was smart, accomplished, efficient, bossy, overbearing, stubborn. Creative,

sometimes - when it came to invention and innovation. But never pretty. Especially not from children. In fact, the other adults frequently told her she had a daunting presence, as much as she tried to be friendly with kids. Eventually, she gave up trying at all.

She liked this girl already.

Lips cracking into a surprised smile, Sush said, "Thank you, Enora. Your uncle was right about you being a sweetheart. But he didn't tell me about Lionel MacDonald. Who's he?"

Greg did tell her. But he left out the pup's name when he shared the tale, using what he thought was a suitable nickname, so before Enora could reply, he explained, "It's the bastard - the one wh—."

"Greg. Claw," Lucy snarled.

Realizing his tongue slipped, he intended to curse, "Oh f—.", promptly substituting it with, "Oh, great."

As he swallowed and met the queen's fiery gaze, his cousin promptly took a step back from the queen with a proud smile and crossed his arms as if he was giving his wife free reins to pounce.

In Greg's arms, Enora asked innocently, "What's bastard, Uncle Gweg?"

On Xandar's sides, Reida and Ken tugged his pants and asked him the same question, as did Lewis and Ianne with Annie and Christian, at which time Xandar fibbed and told the pups that he'd never heard that word before in his life, adding that Greg would be the best person to explain what it was, seeing that he used it.

Christian merely told his children, "What your uncle just said." He thumb-pointed to Xandar, internally grateful for not needing to be the one to explain and simply piggybacked on his cousin's lie.

All eyes fell on Greg.

Greg returned his sights to the pure little thing in his arms, not knowing

how to explain because his mind froze. So many things to teach her yet so many things couldn't be taught yet. Now with the queen's glare burning through his skin, he wondered if his days of imparting knowledge to the pup were numbered.

A cherry voice came from the speakers, asking the participants to meet under the red and yellow tent for a short briefing. Enora's eyes bulged wide and a sense of urgency took over her when she wriggled in her uncle's hold and patted his shoulder, demanding him to put her down.

Setting her on her feet, Enora started to flee when Lucy promptly stopped her, holding her by her arms and told her she wasn't allowed to use that word, making her promise to never use it.

In a hurry to get to the briefing, Enora mindlessly nodded and was only freed from her mother's hold after Lucy kissed her good luck. In her little white shoes, Enora followed the yellow arrows guiding the pups to the field for the briefing. Her family watched her speed with the other participants to the tent, forming a line with two teachers, one of whom was Hailey, doing a headcount in front.

All eyes returned to Greg. The appearance of Alpha Juan and his family, along the former alpha and luna - Ken and Janice - gave the impression that Lucy had back-up, though her family had no idea what was going on. The old man turned to his son-in-law, a silent demand of an immediate explanation for his daughter's readiness to kill - and Xandar obediently linked him, sending the scowling old man to a light chuckle as he shared the knowledge with his mate, who was less impressed - a reaction that had her husband chuckling more.

The noise in the background couldn't even penetrate the silent atmosphere. And the duke came up with the first excuse he could think of. "On the bright side, my queen, it isn't anyone's first word."

A chuckle bubbled up Xandar's throat, but he bit back, struggling to

hold back the laughter and smile. His amusement was not shared by Lucy, who huffed between angry breaths, "You... have no idea... how long it took to undo that. You're lucky we have so many witnesses."

"I am grateful, my queen. And I do apologize... In my defense, that pup didn't deserve any name other than the one that just slipped."

"That. Is not a defense," Lucy noted pointedly, adding, "Though you'd be happy to know he was actually expelled."

"Really?" Greg questioned, the stars in his eyes matched his niece's from earlier.

"Don't push it," Lucy reprimanded, disapproving the shine in his eyes that her own husband had the night before, despite the slight grin sneaking onto her own lips. "The pup exhausted all three warnings and was expelled. That's the end of it."

Glancing at Sush, who was finding Greg's interaction with Lucy more entertaining than daunting, the queen composed herself and said they should head for their seats, so they did, offering her Blue Crescent family a hug when she turned.

Following the royals at their heels who held each of their pup's hand on one side and their mate's on the other, Sush murmured Greg's way, "She's right, you know?"

"About what?" His hand left her back and fingers slid between hers.

Cherishing the warmth and strength from his callous palm, she answered, "You're lucky there are too many witnesses here for her to murder you."