

Chapter 77

Ken was on Lucy's lap when she chatted with Liam, her favorite nephew, who was already nine years old, picking up math and science taken by twelve-year-olds but was struggling in general studies since he spent most of his time in the scientific realm that he'd always failed to allocate enough time to keep up with the happenings of the kingdom.

He only got a decent grade because his father was alpha and mother a luna and minister. Conversation on the kingdom's affairs and those of the pack was normal at home, which was apparently enough for him to pass but never enough to score. He didn't mind it, nor did his parents or favorite aunt, though his grandmother - ever the perfectionist and high achiever even at her current age - did suggest he try allocating more time for the subject. Liam tried it for three days before calling it quits and returning to the numbers and equations that put the shine in his eyes and made him lose track of time.

Reida sat between him and Ianne as the two girls listened to Liam with deep interest, being science and math geeks themselves. When Liam talked about the cardiovascular or respiratory systems of any species, Reida's ears perked; and when he talked about the pollination and certain flora's ability to self-fertilize, Ianne didn't blink. But when he began rambling about the solar system with brighter eyes and more elaborate hand gestures, the girls turned back to each other and did a recap of everything they'd just learned from him.

The trio were close, so much so that whenever Reida informed Ianne she and her family were visiting Blue Crescent, Ianne would beg her parents to let her tag along, and the three would conduct experiments together behind the packhouse, in Liam's room, in the basement, or at the sink - the last one had Hale and Lucy scraping off some glittery, blue

thing from the surface for half an hour. Juan even had to have the piping below the sink changed because of it while Xandar had to make a call for certain underground piping in the pack to be replaced when the same blue substance got stuck and inhibited the waterway. The adults then told the pups to pick another place next time.

Some experiments were successful, but most weren't. Even so, the trio always had fun. They always did something fresh, saw something new, and learned something different.

Ciera - one of the pups Juan and Hale adopted - was now in her late teens and loved chatting with Christian about economics, and the duke was more than happy to share what he knew and how he thought things through, even lending her books and recommending podcasts and courses that she may be interested in. When she asked for a tertiary programme recommendation, the duke was steadfast in suggesting Helm University, then paused, before telling her to check the programmes in the vampire community first - being an option that the students of his generation never had.

Another three of Juan's and Hales's sons who were more interested in business, and another daughter who immersed herself in history always fought for Xandar's attention, asking questions and getting intrigued or mind blown by answers and explanations. Before they began, the boys and girl normally flipped a coin to see whether their conversation with Uncle Xandar should start with business or history. To the boys' annoyance, their sister seemed to have some kind of luck in the coin flip more often than they liked, and it didn't matter how many times they swapped the coin.

Little Ken, despite being on his mother's lap, paid full attention whenever his father explored tales of history and explained the aftermath of each event to his maternal cousins, thinking to himself that these were far better than bedtime stories and definitely beat the

nursery rhymes and pesky tongue twisters in kindergarten.

By far, the only quiet one was Lewis Blackfur, whose eyes never left Sush. Sush was speaking to Ken, Janice, Juan and Hale about her work, the retired and present lunas curious about the way they nominated and appointed their superiors and the retired and present alphas interested in the gadgets and systems the hunters had come up with in recent years. Greg gazed at her with pride as she explained the repertoire eloquently, and the energy that radiated off her when she spoke had his lycan cooing.

When Sush's gaze tore away from the elderly couple and locked with the pup's, Lewis cocked his head as if pondering on a curious equation on the board. Head pivoted to his mother, he whispered something. Annie's eyes flickered to Sush before the chief saw the duchess turn to her son with a proud smile as she encouraged, "Go on. Ask first, okay?"

Lewis nodded obediently and made his way from the far end of the bench.

It was only when he got up did Sush spot the camera in his hands hanging from his neck by a dark gray strap as he sauntered past the adults, toward her.

When he'd finally reached her, Greg's left brow lifted in a way like he was asking the pup why he was here. The dukes were placed at opposite ends for a reason - to stay at opposite ends.

Not even noticing Greg, Lewis asked timidly, "Can I take a photo of you, Sushi?"

Not minding the slight error in her name since it came out from a child, she said, "Uh...sure. Right here?"

Lewis nodded, more confidently as he stepped back and looked through the lenses. Dissatisfied, he stepped forward and asked if she could sit with her shoulders back - the way he saw her when she was

speaking to the alphas and lunas behind her. Lewis then asked Greg - nicely - whether he would be so kind as to move out of the frame while he took his shot.

Irritation at the pup's audacity flickered through Greg but Sush got him to move from his seat, eager to please the pup. Greg stood to the side and waited with crossed arms.

Lewis took two shots, checked and took another two, then smiled at the results, moseyed to her as she moved back to her space and Lewis climbed up and took Greg's seat, showing Sush his shots when he said, "You're bweautiful. See, you have a nice nose." She'd been here for less than an hour and she'd been called pretty AND beautiful AND been told she had a nice nose. She liked it here a lot. And Sush may be biased but Lewis was the cutest little boy she'd ever seen and the way he leaned into her side made her heart melt in a way that she didn't think was possible.

When Lewis began swinging his legs, it was clear he wasn't going to move, and Greg instinctively shot Blackfur a glare.

Christian, who caught the scowl by accident, paused mid-sentence in his conversation with Ciera, brows furrowed and he leaned back further to see what the issue was, making a mental note to buy his son whatever he wanted the next time they went to a toy store before turning back to Greg with a you-deserve-it smirk, one which had Greg heaving a long exhale. Turning back to the pup with the camera, Greg thought to himself that if he didn't have a Blackfur he hated most, he did now.

Not having the heart to ask Lewis to leave, Sush invited the boy to sit on her lap. At the same time, Annie noticed the stolen seat, making her push her husband further down the bench with her ass as the duchess prompted everyone else to move toward her to recreate the other duke's lost seat.

Nodding to the duchess in gratitude and residual guilt, Greg sank into the empty spot. He was very tempted to sweep little Blackfur off the bench with one hand now that the entitled little brat planted himself between him and his huntress.

Lewis was practically showing Sush his entire portfolio from the camera, explaining where he took each one, telling her which landscape she'd look good in - which was most if not all of them.

The speakers sounded again and the participants finally emerged from the red and yellow tent.



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