

The Indomitable Huntress & the Hardened Duke - by Stina's Pen

Chapter 4

In the evening, with Enora in the space on his crossed legs, they tore stale bread and the girl clearly didn't get the memo when she aimed the first chunk at the mother duck of purple feathers, turquoise beak, and yellow eyes. She only missed because Greg lifted her and turned her away right on time, so the bread was hauled neatly in front of the animal, who quacked in appreciation. And so it became a game, for Enora to estimate how far off she should aim to get the ducks while her uncle deflected her point of focus.

Her giggles showed that she was having more fun than their previous duck-feeding exercise. When the last of the bread was gone, some of which injured two ducklings and most of which scattered around the flock, Enora pulled out a strand of leaf next to Greg's leg and tried to reach the dragonfly minding its own business above an empty lily pad.

Before the insect got away, a gray elastic structure came from underwater at the edge of the lily pad, and the dragonfly disappeared into a gray frog's mouth. Enora flung the leaf in her hand at the frog who ate her newfound life toy, not that the reptile cared as it plopped back into the water, blending in with the stones at the bottom.

Greg chuckled, his chin gently rested on the crown of her head. "Hey, sweetheart, can I ask you something?"

"Mm-hm."

"Did you... hate Izabella?"

Enora pursed her lips for a second before muttering, "Maybe."

"And your brother and sister?"

"Maybe."

"Sweetheart," he turned her to face him. "You know what I love most about you?"

Her head swung side to side.

"That you are honest. You tell me the truth no matter what. That's what I love most about you."

She blinked twice, then averted his gaze, murmuring, "I don't like Aunty Iza."

"There we go," Greg's tone and small smile sounded so encouraging that Enora continued, "Her lips are too wed. Her fingers are always cold. Her smwile is like those bad guys on tv. Weida says her laugh is skeawy. Ken says Aunty Iza makes him feel icky. He always hides behind Mommy. Weida always gets Daddy to help wash her hands and face if Aunty Iza touches her."

Wow, Greg thought: that was a lot of information. "Were you ever... scared of her?"

Enora shook her head. "I'm skeawd when my teacher calls Mommy."

Fair, Greg thought. He'd be scared, too. "Thank you, sweetheart. I just had to know."

Pulling out another blade of grass, Enora leaned into his warmth and articulated, "I'm not skeawd of Aunty Iza. I'm skeawd that... if I don't like Aunty Iza, I don't get to feed duckies with you anymore. And I don't get my special seat when I go to school. And you won't bwing me and Weida and Ken to school anymore. And you won't bwing us home."

Greg didn't think his heart could break any further. He then realized that Izabella's death didn't leave it hollow. He could feel the organ enduring a sharp twist from Enora's words. "Sweetheart, that would never happen. Why would you think that? Did Mommy or Daddy tell you that?" It was his cousin. It HAD to be his cousin. Goddess, he hated his cousin. Or was it the distant cousin? Maybe his distant cousin-in-law?

With a shake of her little head, she said, "Mommy and Daddy say you will love me no matter what."

"They're right." Oh, so it wasn't his cousin.

Mindlessly tearing the grass into strips, she said, "After I wanted to buwn Aunty Iza's teddy, you didn't come for two weeks. Mommy and Daddy said you had work. But you never work for two weeks, Uncle Gweg." Technically, he worked everyday, but he refrained from correcting her when her eyes watered as she looked up at him and asked, "Were you angwy with me for hating Aunty Iza's teddy, Uncle Gweg?"

Oh. It was him. This was all on him.

"Sweetheart, I was never angry with you. In fact, I should have let you burn the teddy. And I really was working. I was helping your Aunt Pelly set up a security system in her empire. But you're right. I should have called." Rubbing her arms to soothe her, he vouched, "If I have to work that long again, I'll call, okay?"

"Mm-kay." The glistening eyes cleared as she snuggled into him.

“And sweetheart, you don’t have to call Izabella “Aunty” anymore. She’s not your aunt. She’s never going to be your aunt, alright? She’s gone.” He kept his head up so she didn’t see how his eyes watered and his Adam’s apple bobbed.

A ghost of a smile curled Enora’s lips and she simply played with her grass and nodded like it wasn’t news. “Mommy said she left to pay for something. Weida asked what she forgot to pay. Mommy said it’s a few things. All very expensive.”

The edge of Greg’s lips tugged upwards. Left - yes, left the universe. Pay for something - her sins, her betrayal, for breaking his trust and his heart. All very expensive. He preferred priceless, but this worked too.

“Your Mommy’s right,” Greg mused. “And let’s not say Izabella’s name even if we have to, okay?”

Enora’s brows pinched in confusion. “You mean... give her another name, Uncle Gweg?”

“Yes. Like a nickname. A secret code. One that only we both know. You pick.”

Her lilac eyes were on the ducks but her mind was far away, brows creased as she pondered hard. Her fingers on the grass were so still it looked like she was posing for a portrait.

When she finally moved, her lips parted and a toothy grin lit up her face when she suggested, “Ugly Deli?”

Greg’s brows rose in surprise. Izabella Delilah was hot. Smoking hot. When they went public, the media described her as a rare beauty with an enviable body and a charismatic smile, which Greg wholeheartedly agreed with. Then again, he was slightly blinded by the mate bond. Slightly.

At present, Greg matched his niece’s smile. “Ugly Deli it is.”

“Yay!”

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When Lucy asked Enora how duck-feeding went, the fact that her pup leaped in jubilation with twinkling eyes and began rambling about the ducklings, dragonflies, frogs, and grass showed that she had fun. But when her mother questioned whether she hurt any ducks with askance, Enora pressed her lips tight and shook her head, refusing to look her mother in the eye. After giving Greg a hasty hug and the usual goodbye kiss on his cheek, Enora bypassed her mother and scampered into the villa toward her room.

When they heard the door shut with a thud, Xandar uttered, "Getting into trouble seems to be good practice for her speed. She didn't even trip this time."

Lucy exhaled hard. She really didn't want to ask. "How many did she assault today, Greg?"

The duke shrugged like it wasn't a big deal. "Two. Ducklings."

"This girl," Lucy reproached with knitted brows, glancing in the direction her daughter disappeared to.

"It's just a phase, my queen. The ducks will bore her one day. Besides, there were six ducks in the pond so the majority was safe. Just as we can't realistically be expected to protect everyone in the kingdom, we can't realistically be expected to protect every duck in the pond."

Lucy pinched her glabella, exhaling hard, as Xandar's strong hands came to her shoulders, his thumb rubbing soothing circles while he himself pressed his lips together, trying to contain his amusement. Unbeknownst to him, his simple gesture set a heaviness in Greg's heart, reminding the duke of how close he was to having what they had - a relationship, a bond that was destined to last a lifetime. And Greg had to remind himself that - unlike his cousin and queen - the bond with Izabella was anything but authentic.

He harrumphed and, out of curiosity, asked, "How long have you both known your pups hated my mate?"

Their eyes snapped to him, both flabbergasted. A quick glance flickered between them before Lucy said, "Since the first time they met her, so a little over two months?"

His thick brows pulled together. "And no one ever mentioned this to me because?"

Xandar remarked, "Because we thought you knew." His brows dipped lower. "The pups weren't even subtle. Reida and Ken tried to be but Enora definitely wasn't. Besides, you always seem to know everything."

"What a flattering explanation," Greg replied numbly with as much sarcasm as he could muster.

Xandar wasn't done. "And honestly, Greg, even if we wanted to tell you, how do you expect us to do it? Just walk up to you and ask our kids to spill every insult—"

"That'll do, darling. He gets it." Lucy's hand on her husband's chest made him drop the rest of the sentence before she turned her attention back to the duke. "Greg... We, as adults, understand that... in a family... there will be creatures that we clique with and also creatures that we don't and perhaps never will get along with. But that doesn't

mean the latter can't be part of the family, especially if she's good for her mate, more so if she makes him happy. The thing is, Greg... your happiness triumphed over the... intolerance our pups have for Izabella."

"It shouldn't triumph over their safety, my queen."

"And it didn't. It never did," she firmly replied.

That was when it hit him - how Lucy and Xandar always insisted he carried his poison detector around, especially when they knew Izabella was in town. They made a point to ask whether the detector ever detected anything: it didn't. And whether it was switched on: it was. And whether it was under constant maintenance and improvement: again, yes, it was.

Greg had assumed their paranoia was because mavericks, new and old, now roamed the streets and posed a threat to their pups. He thought they were particularly concerned about the newer recruits. Only now did Greg realize it was never the mavericks they were skeptical about, it was her - Izabella.

In the two times Greg came to get Enora for a bonding session with Izabella, Lucy reminded him that Enora was never to be left with anyone but him, not even with his mate, meaning if Enora needed a potty break, Greg was to accompany her, not Izabella. The queen couldn't even stop herself from asking Greg and her daughter to be careful during those times.

"You always knew something was off," Greg murmured, looking into her lilac and onyx eyes.

Biting her bottom lip, Lucy nodded curtly and guiltily. "The issue was I didn't know what I was worried about. I wanted to trust her. I liked how happy you were with her. But something about her felt amiss. I didn't say anything because I didn't have hard proof. I didn't even have a proper reason, to be honest. She was... trying to be approachable, trying to be nice, trying to... belong. And I didn't want to take away someone who meant so much to you based on my own groundless distrust."

"Your instinct..." Greg interjected. "...should have been a good enough reason to distrust, my queen." He added her title to sound less rude.

Quietly, she admitted, "I don't disagree. With hindsight, I knew I should have said something, no matter how baseless it was. At least it would have hinted you in some way. I... There's no excuse. I'm sorry."

Greg took in a lungful of the evening air, mindlessly gazing at the water feature, watching parts of the water scintillating under the last light of day, forming little stars that danced with the endless ripples. "Just so we're clear, I'm not blaming either of you for this. I just... had to know what everyone was thinking when I was rendered blind."

He didn't join them for dinner, saying he still needed time alone, driving home and running through a few messages from his followers - the mavericks - before plopping into his home office chair.

The twins' birthday was the following week and Greg settled on getting Enora a toy crossbow she'd been eyeing on. He wanted to get her another archery set - the biggest one in the best store, but Hailey called dibs on it in the maverick's group link, so Greg had to find something else. For Ken, he'd be getting a boring 500-piece puzzle set. The child seemed obsessed with working on those after school to the point the queen had to confiscate them a few times just to make him finish his homework.

Greg then wondered which pup even did puzzles these days when virtual games were so much more exciting with their vibrant colors, vivid animation and exhilarating sound effects. When the duke deduced that the prince probably got the boring gene from the king, who got it from the Blackfurs, he began mentally combing through the things he'd like his cousin and cousin-in-law to demand from the hunters.

Stina's Pen

Entertainment of choice: toy crossbow, puzzles, or video games?

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