

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

## Chapter 3

At the Paw-Claw residence - the king changed his last name to include his mate's a few years back as a birthday gift to himself - Greg extracted a white envelope from under his seat as the two pups behind raced in unbuckling themselves before getting out as soon as the car doors were opened and raced to the front door. Enora waited patiently for Greg to unbuckle her, carry her out, and set her on her feet. Her hand reached for his as they took their time traipsing to the entrance.

Enora was filling him in with her classmate's profile and quirks, and he listened attentively, enjoying the momentary distraction despite having already memorized every single profile of the pups and their families in that kindergarten.

It wasn't as if he knew everything either, he admitted. He didn't know which ones threw watercolors and painted their classmates' faces and clothes during art, demanded a potty break twenty times a day or vandalized the tables and chairs and subsequently got detention. All this nitty gritty, Greg learned from Enora. He particularly liked the one who screamed and cried in history lessons because the pup found historical pictures and ancient writings spooky.

King Alexandar and Queen Lucianne greeted their pups with hugs that lasted longer than usual and kisses that spoke for their relief before sending them to the kitchen, where Empress Pellethia and Empress-Consort Octavia would keep them distracted while the king and queen spoke to the duke.

Enora, after being embraced and kissed by her parents, stood between them and her uncle, refusing to leave. Greg asked if he could take her to the pond later that evening, emphasizing that Enora promised not to assault the ducks this time, even though she'd said no such thing. Enora blinked her wide lilac eyes - her secret weapon to raise the chances of getting what she wanted.

Her father still wondered how - of all the skills his youngest could have inherited from her mother - she inherited this one.

Enora had grown to learn that blinking innocently bagged her father and persuading her mother was the real challenge, so she was elated when Lucy said yes so quickly this time that she wrapped her mother's leg in a grateful hug, but then something came to her mind.

Looking at her uncle with a faltered smile, she asked, "Uncle Gweg, will Aunty Izabella be coming too?"

Lucy and Xandar stiffened. Lucy's mouth opened but Greg beat her in offering an explanation, "No, sweetheart. It's just you and me. Is that okay?"

"Yay!" Enora wrapped her uncle's leg before obediently disappearing to the kitchen to join her brother and sister. The faster she ate and finished her mundane homework, the quicker she'd be throwing bread at the ducks to vent out her frustration of being trapped with coloring and repetitive scribbling of the same word just to learn the spelling.

The three adults at the front door exchanged relieved but awkward looks. Greg exhaled hard and began their low murmur conversation. "I honestly don't know where to start, so why don't one of you deliver the first blow and we'll take things from there."

"Greg," Xandar began, his hand falling on his mate's waist as he chose his words carefully. "We'll deal with things with the hunters. If you want to keep the corpse or require anything that can be traced to their territory, just say the word, we'll handle the politics from our end."

"I'm half-surprise you're not strangling me right now, Cousin." For once, the way Greg addressed him contained no hatred. The tone came out flat and neutral.

Lucy uttered, "There's no need to strangle you, Greg. You put our pups first. You put the entire kingdom first."

That sounded really nice and noble, but Greg knew he only put Enora first. Reida second. Ken? Maybe somewhere on the same level as his followers, so that'd be fourth or fifth. The rest of the kingdom? Well, unless they had a scarred past and could potentially qualify as a maverick, they technically weren't his problem. That large chunk of the population was left in the very safe hands of his cousins and cousins-in-law. Anyway, here was the point: even with a shorter list of creatures to protect, he screwed up when he trusted something as vague and unreliable as feelings from the fucking mate bond!

Shaking his head at his blindness with a self-deprecating smile, Greg murmured, "And to think someone like me deserved love." He scoffed. "Pathetic."

The queen interjected, "It's not pathetic, Greg. It's not pathetic to want to be wanted. This was a terrible experience... No, 'terrible' isn't a strong enough word. The word I'm looking for probably hasn't been invented yet. Anyway, the fact is none of this devalues you as a creature. You were so many things before she showed up and you are still those things now that she's gone. You have us. You have your people. You have Enora."

"Thankfully," Greg muttered. "If there isn't anything else at the moment, I'll come by later. To take her to the pond."

"Have you eaten? You could join us for lunch."

“No, my queen. I need to... get some shit out of my head.”

Lucy understood that better than anyone. After a rejection, one normally wanted to be alone. Nodding in comprehension, her brows pinched together when she reiterated Xandar’s words, “Let us know if you have any specific request about the hunters involved, Greg. And whether you need anything else.”

“Duly noted. Thank you, my queen. Cousin.”

Trotting to his car without looking back, he sped out of the residence for the forest where he used to spend a lot of time with his now dead mate.

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Striding along the familiar path that he used to mosey through with Izabella - hand in hand - like an actual couple, he had to fight off the sudden urge to burn down the entire forest to erase every lie created here.

He reached the tree - their tree.

Greg brought Enora along once and she hated it. Not the forest. She hated having to spend time with his mate. Izabella actually glowed brighter but with hindsight, Greg now knew that her giddy flamboyance was for her own motives, not because she was interested in getting to know the family member he held closest to his heart.

Looking at the dried up leaves on the ground now, Greg recalled how Enora would put herself at least three feet away from the woman, despite being repeatedly told that she wasn’t going to be harmed, despite being shown that the huntress carried no weapon, despite Izabella bringing a teddy bear to coax her.

By the way, the teddy bear - Enora accepted it to appease her uncle but the moment Izabella left in a separate car after the date and Greg was bringing Enora home, she asked for a potty break midway. After parking in front of a thrift store, Greg thought Enora was warming up to the stuffed animal when she brought it out from the car with her.

As they approached the store where there was a bin outside, she feigned surprise and pointed at a tree to Greg’s right. He held her on his left. The moment he turned, Enora flung the plush toy into the trash. His swift sight caught her doing it. He’d ask if it was an accident but it clearly wasn’t. And the girl had the audacity to turn back to him with a satisfied smile and said, “I don’t need to potty anymore, Uncle Gweg.”

Greg lowered himself into a squat to level their eyes, and when she told him why she pretended to look accepting of the toy, her uncle pecked a kiss on her forehead and apologized for making her feel the need to accept Izabella’s gift just to make him happy.

Greg promised that he'd never put her in a position where she had to appease him again. She could do or say anything, as long as she wasn't hurting anyone.

Enora blinked in a way like an idea came to her. Her eyes went to the trash can that was far too tall for her to see the contents inside. At the end of her contemplation, she asked innocently, "Does that mean I can burn the teddy here, Uncle Gweg?"

"No," Greg said and hoisted her into her arms, carrying her back to the car before she got any other ideas. "Weaver would freak out with the open burning; your mother would slaughter me; and your other uncle would laugh while she did it. And you would be grounded until you turn eighteen. Maybe longer."

Greg now chuckled at the memory. He never told Izabella about it, keeping his lips sealed even when she suspected Enora might have given the teddy away "because she didn't look very happy with it". It was interesting. Of all the things a pup could do with a toy they didn't like - leave it in a corner of the room and never play with it, torture it for the hell of it, taking out the insides - Izabella settled on the reason that Enora might have given it away.

Pups were territorial of their toys, even the ones they didn't like. It was about having more than it was about liking. How would an adult think that a pup had disposed of the toy unless they knew the toy wasn't in the child's playroom?

At least his niece was sharper than he was. It was a good thing Enora got rid of it.

Upon coming out of memory lane, Greg stripped and shifted. His brown-furred animal flexed its shoulders and growled at the tree. Then, with its bare hands on both sides of the trunk, hauled it towards the sky with all its might. The muscles in his body tightened, veins popped, his jaw tensed, and when the sound of the first snap of roots entered his ears, a surge of strength motivated him to tug further. More snaps followed until the entire tree was uprooted.

Lifting the tree above his head like it was just a barbell, his chest rose and fell as his eyes searched for a suitable position before he threw it in the direction of the coursing river, forming a diagonal bridge across the stream. Shifting back and getting out a lighter, he set the tree on fire and watched the billowing smoke engulfing the space. He kept an eye on the grass, splashing water if any chunk caught the flames. When the tree was about eighty percent burnt through and could fit into the river, he kicked it in and the crisp structure submerged for a moment before coming back to the surface, letting the water take it downstream.

If this was ever reported, Weaver would freak out. The queen would kill him. And Blackfur would have a good laugh.

Would you have taken the teddy? XD

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