

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

Chapter 2

Izabella opened her mouth to speak but found herself muted. She tried to scream and realized that she was only forcing air out of her lungs.

Before her brain computed what was happening, vines appeared from the concrete against her back and bound her limbs and body to the wall. Flowers of transparent petals grew within seconds on the tendrils, exuding a scent that she didn't think much of when two women she'd never seen before seemed to magically appear behind Greg, both dressed in black.

Izabella screamed Greg's name, trying to tell him about the two women, who she perceived as imposters, not knowing that they were the empress and consort of the vampire community, whose presence Greg requested.

Greg, his eyes now a deep onyx, began, "Izabella Delilah," the fact that he used her full name and that his eyes were a shade that she'd never seen told her everything she needed to know. Her neck stiffened. Her wrists tried to break free but the tendrils only tightened around them.

The duke smirked. "Did you really think I wouldn't find out?"

Her breathing shallowed. But her eyes maintained their adamance and ferocity.

Greg took one step closer, making sure they looked each other eye to eye when he uttered, "I have to say, the misguided confidence you and your hunter boyfriend - who is clearly not your ex - have about me choosing you over my family, my queen, my niece, really is the cherry on top of the cake of foolishness."

She said nothing, but merely smiled - the most sinister smile he'd ever seen her show. He didn't even know she had a sinister smile. She was always sweet, flirty, but never vicious. Fierce, maybe. But never wicked. And the worst part was they both knew it didn't take any words for the message to be conveyed: for three months, Greg Claw had been the foolish one.

"We'll see who's smiling by the end of this," Greg mused.

His rough hands trailed up her butt to her jacket, then - without warning - he tore the garment and took satisfaction in the way her eyes widened in horror as she tried to scream, "NO!"

Casually, he instructed, "Nod for yes. Shake for no. Did this belong to that so-called ex?"

Izabella's plan was to keep her head still, hoping to minimize the threat posed to her lover now that the cat was out of the bag. But the flowery scent contained a truth-telling element that compelled her to tell the truth - to nod. Just as Greg suspected. He scoffed darkly, not knowing whether it was contempt or hurt that engulfed every cell and filled every last vessel in his body.

So much for believing that she ended things with her lover the day the mate bond with Greg was discovered - when they met at a hunter-lycan mediation that he instinctively wanted to join even though he never cared about lawful politics. Some shit about her love-at-first-sight declaration and habitual repetition to anyone who'd listen.

In a zipped compartment of the torn portion of the jacket, he extracted a recording device that she'd been carrying around, a device disguised as her crimson lipstick, crushing it with his bare hand. Tugging the blue handbag from her shoulder with force, the gold-colored chain strap broke and created a small wound on her shoulder.

Trying his best to ignore the twist in his chest when she winced in pain, Greg tossed the bag to Ivory who Izabella hadn't even seen appear from the side. Greg relished the way her eyes were incinerating his own because she knew she was losing, admitting to herself that there was no way out, unfiltered detestation now on full display.

She never loved him. He doubted she even liked him. Then again, she had an unfair advantage: humans, unlike wolves or lycans, didn't feel the mate bond until they were marked.

Damn the so-called sacred gift.

To minimize the pain for himself, Greg knew what he had to do first. Even his animal admitted there was no turning back, as reluctant as they were for what was to come.

In a voice he barely recognized, one that seemed soulless and dead, he recited, "I, Greg Claw, reject you, Izabella Delilah...as my mate." It was as if a dagger had been struck into his heart, eliciting the most anguishing howl from his animal, a yowl of loss so piercing that Greg felt he was breaking for them both. His human, however, pressed his lips together and refused to show any pain on the outside. The agony came in waves, gnawing at his chest, shooting into his heart, weakening his being.

His fingers then spread across Izabella's chest, feeling the vibration of her beating heart, a rhythm that he once fell asleep to now became one that would haunt him forever. His claws extended slowly, entering her flesh leisurely as she gritted her teeth, adamantly trying not to express her affliction but the tears escaping the corners of her eyes discredited her.

Red smears blossomed on her shirt, giving the sunny yellow a new color and when her first cry of pain came out in a puff of air, he forced himself to smirk darker, reminding himself not to let what he felt for her get in the way of relishing in her suffering.

Her tensed body was loosening, her face was decolorizing, and right before she passed out, Greg extended his claws all the way, jolting her body when he reached for her heart and tore it out, dropping it onto the ground like the organ was just sloshy trash as he conveyed her lifeless body hanging there into memory. The original plan was to crush her heart but he couldn't bring himself to do it. This was as far as he could go.

Seeing this - the creature he thought was his to trust, to protect, to love, who ended up fooling him - made him release a shaky breath as the first of his tears fell.

“Greg.”

He knew that voice anywhere. Anyone knew that voice anywhere - the one that he and the rest of the kingdom instinctively bowed to. Firm with the occasional softness. Normally authoritative, now solemn.

She insisted on coming and stayed far enough not to be seen but near enough to watch things unfold and be ready to get involved if necessary. Greg appreciated that she didn't interfere, that she - as always - understood that he wanted to do this: to clean up his own mess.

After a hasty wipe of the tears, he exhaled hard, wondering if this was what it felt like to be free from the mate bond - like everything in him was hollowed out. His eyes remained on the ground as he turned in her direction and fell on one knee, from his obedience to her or from the heartache of losing his mate, he wasn't sure. “My queen,” he acknowledged.

He couldn't even bring himself to look at her shoes, let alone her face. And he could imagine the larger pair next to hers - her husband's - kicking his face for his failure to uncover the threat sooner, for putting his children in danger.

Greg didn't know what to expect. He wasn't even scared anymore. Enora was safe from Izabella now. That was all he needed.

A small pair of arms wrapped around his shoulders. The queen's scent surrounded him and the lilac color of her dress came into his peripheral vision as he knelt there, immobilized by shock.

In a sorrowful but grateful whisper, she said, “Thank you.”

His arms came around her, briefly squeezing her in return, appreciating that she didn't say “I'm sorry” or anything that reeked sympathy. He got enough of that from half his people and he felt that energy radiating off the king's being. It was getting suffocating.

Hoisting himself up and pulling the queen to a standing position in the process, his eyes went to the bush on the opposite side of the road just to avoid making eye contact with anyone. "You two should head back. It's my turn today. Your pups would know something's up if they see us all here. Enora would definitely know something's up."

From the blurred corner of his eye, he saw his cousin - the king - nod in agreement, and the queen muttered, "We'll see you later." Only after his cousin offered him a brief squeeze on his right shoulder did they leave with the empress and consort.

Alissa and Ivory dealt with the corpse and brought the handbag to the Den. They intended to assess all her makeup and accessories, even the bag itself, since they were suspected to be well-disguised weapons.

At the kindergarten, Hailey, whose eyes remained more alert than they'd ever been in her entire career, keeping a close eye on her surroundings and holding the two princesses and the prince close, now gazed at the trio with a smile, relief washing over her when she received Alissa's update.

Greg washed his hands with bottled water and disinfected it with sanitizer. The last thing he needed was for one of the pups to smell blood on him. He checked his clothes, making sure there weren't any bloodstains and exhaled impatiently when he had to change everything, throwing the clothes into the trash before brisk walking to the kindergarten, avoiding everyone's glances filled with questions that he was not going to entertain as he searched for the only creatures who mattered.

"There! He's here!" he heard the prince, Ken, exclaim.

The smallest girl in her violet dress behind Ken looked up, then gazed at Greg's left and right. When she discovered he came alone, her cute little lips parted to display the grin that melted her uncle's heart as she dashed toward him, almost tripping twice in her matching violet shoes before she leaped into his open arms and screamed, "Uncle Gweg!"

Squeezing her, mentally conveying apologies that weren't spoken and taking comfort in her safety, he pulled himself together, acted casual and asked the usual question, "How's my little sweetheart?"

"I shot three cups at breaktime!"

"Did you now?" She nodded proudly, making Greg smile. "That's two cups up from yesterday. Want ice-cream to celebrate?"

Pressing her lips and shaking her head, she placed her little hand on his nose, something she did when she was going to ask for something. "I want to feed duckies again."

Greg's brows raised in comprehension, seeing the mischief in her innocuous lilac eyes. "We'll have to go home and ask your Mommy and Daddy first. And if they say yes, remember, this time we're throwing the bread *near* the ducks, not *at* them. Alright, sweetheart?"

Enora chuckled but didn't give an answer.

Instructing the elder princess, Reida, and the prince, Ken, to grip onto his pants, they crossed the road together. The doors of the driver and passenger seat flipped upwards like wings ready for take off, and Ken could finally reach the button on the driver's side specifically placed at the highest region so that it was out of the reach of pups. Greg had always allowed Ken three seconds to try to reach for the button before doing it himself and telling the pup he might get it the next time.

To both the duke's and prince's surprise, he managed to reach it today, and Reida gaped at the opening door to the backseat she'd seen hundreds of times, then back at her grinning brother.

Greg began the usual headcount, despite there being only three of them. "Alright, let's go. Backseat headcount: Princess. Check. Cousin look-alike. Check." Watching the two climb into the booster seats, sit upright, then methodically buckling themselves, he then leaned over to make the final adjustments for both pups, double-checked, then jabbed the button for the door close, bringing Enora to the passenger's seat and buckling her himself.

When he was done, he left a kiss on Enora's forehead and said, "Special seat headcount: my little sweetheart. Check." Enora giggled and paddled her feet before Greg shut the door and got into the driver's side.

On the way back, Greg tried not to think about the emptiness in his chest and listened to how Ken and Reida went on their usual conversation of why only Enora could ever sit in front, which the elder princess answered - probably for the hundredth time - was because their youngest sibling was their uncle's favorite, which the prince found unfair.

"Grow up, you little shit. Life isn't fair," Greg thought to himself. No, he didn't care that Ken was only four.



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What do you think? Is life fair? On a separate note, remember to leave comments, reviews and gems as you read along!

