

SINGLE ORC DAD NEXT DOOR



ZORA BLACK

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By Zora Black

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CONTENTS

1. Abby.
2. Drek
3. Abby.
4. Drek
5. Abby.
6. Drek
7. Abby.
8. Drek
9. Abby.
10. Drek
11. Abby.
12. Drek
13. Abby.
14. Drek
15. Abby.
16. Drek
17. Abby.
18. Drek
19. Abby.
20. Drek
21. Abby.
22. Drek
23. Abby.
24. Drek
25. Abby.
26. Drek
27. Abby.
28. Drek
29. Abby.
30. Drek

ABBY

“One for you. And one for you. This one right here is yours,” I say under my breath like I’m handing out candy to kids or something, not setting up for this morning’s practice with too much fervor for the average college grad. But I can’t help it. It’s always been easy for me to see the bright side, and there’s nothing brighter than my team.

I don’t let the wet grass beneath my feet slow me down as I lay out cones for today’s soccer drills. The girls are decent weavers but terrible cone placers, so I make sure to get this piece of coach business done before any of my players arrive.

“And what do you know? This one’s for you,” I tell the last patch of grass tasked with holding up the final orange cone. I look around the still-empty field to the parking lot. So far, it’s just my car parked on the blacktop, and I’m glad. I don’t know what talking to cones would look like from a parent’s perspective.

Some people would call my near-constant need to turn mundane activities into games childish. But some people are stuck up and wouldn’t know fun if it kidnapped them for a day at the beach. Which everyone and their dog knows is the best possible outcome when being kidnapped. Unless, I suppose, one was allergic to water or having a good time.

A horn honks, and I smile at the collection of small hands waving out the SUV’s tinted window. Mrs. Moscato, a retired

teacher and one of my player's grandmothers, rolls her own window down to throw a polished hand in my direction.

At least, I assume Mrs. Moscato's hand is polished. Her French tips are always immaculate, whether she's enjoying retirement with her new husband and self-proclaimed sugar daddy or valeting a portion of the team in her loaded Cadillac.

"Seatbelts are for squares!" Sasha, a rambunctious goblin going through a rebellious phase, hollers as soon as she hops out of the ride.

I shake my head from where I'm standing. How many times do I have to tell her being a square is fine? Squares get a lot of stuff done, and stylishly if they're any good. "Viva la seatbelt!" I yell back. "Seatbelts save!"

I figure it's best to challenge her perspective playfully, rather than embarrassing Sasha unnecessarily. After all, what kid likes being constricted? I can make my point while staying playful. It's the high-minded thing to do in my opinion, meeting someone where they are and not where I want them to be.

"Whoo! Yeah, seat belts!" Mrs. Moscato hollers as she backs out.

"Grandma, watch out! Pole! Pole!" Cordelia shouts as the rest of the girls in the carpool do the same.

The SUV stops suddenly as Mrs. Moscato shakes her head and smiles. "And yeah, granddaughters!"

"And side mirrors!" I cup my hands so the words carry. Mrs. Moscato shoots me a thumbs up as she straightens her pimped-out ride, and the girls scurry up to me.

"Seatbelts save!" Cordelia says as soon as she gets to me.

"Not all the time!" Sasha retorts, hands on her hips. "Just check the internet. There are stories."

"No there aren't. That's fake news. Tell her, Coach!" Cordelia begs as the other three girls in the carpool — Tania, Freya, and Nell — catch up.

“I—” A cacophony of classical music cuts me off, blaring from a sleek sports car I’ve never seen before. The great big orc who steps out, all six feet five inches of him, looks our way and my breath catches. *Who is this?* I frown as my brain tries to compute such an odd reaction.

“Elevator music!” Freya and Tania say at the same time, something the two tend to pull off a lot, despite the fact they aren’t twins. They aren’t even siblings or related, though the witch and fairy go together like wet grass and bare feet.

“Technically, it’s Beethoven,” I mutter as Mursha, a blue-eyed orc with more than a little potential in the goalie department, hops out on the other side.

So this is the elusive single dad, I think, used to seeing Mursha in a minivan driven by her serious-looking nanny.

“Technically, who’s that?” Freya and Tania say in unison once more, giggling as Cordelia rolls her eyes.

“All morning, Coach. All morning.”

“You’ll be going to school all day soon enough. Laugh it off with a few exercises,” I say. “And it’s the player’s choice till everyone else arrives.”

I motion to the cones with my head as Cordelia grabs a ball and maneuvers it around the plastic-orange barriers. Freya and Tania break apart and run in opposite directions around the field. I smile to myself, knowing they’ll high-five every time they meet in the middle. I don’t even know what this drill is called or where it came from. It’s their preferred freestyle warm-up, hands down.

“Well, good morning, little miss,” I say cheerily, crossing my arms as Mursha and her hulking father approach. I smile at the orc, but his piercing blue eyes just blink rapidly and look away. What did I do?

“She always starts barefoot, Daddy. Them’s the rules,” she finishes with a quote I’ve adopted as my own. It’s mostly me trying to establish how casually firm boundaries should be treated. As a personal rule, nothing at all to do with soccer most of the time.

“You’re using that phrase wrong, puppet. Rules are actually guidelines, not whatever we want them to be.” He nods in my direction. “Where’s the rest of the kids?”

I frown at him and he taps his watch, which is probably worth more than my car and one of many in a vast collection.

“They’ll be here.”

“Practice is now, right? Don’t tell me we got here early...” I watch him check his phone and figure he’s on a tight schedule or something. Most businessmen are.

“This is practice, Daddy!” Mursha hollers as she runs off to join Cordelia.

“Not everywhere!” he yells, then flicks his eyes my way with an expressionless face. “No offense. But the real world starts on time.”

I wave my hand as if to brush off any potential offense I might have taken. “You’re coming from a good place. That’s what matters.”

He smirks at me as a few more cars pull up and the rest of the team unloads.

“I’m Coach Mallet.” I extend my hand. “But you can call me Abby. Mursha is a great asset to the team.”

“I don’t doubt that,” he replies, and I wonder if he’s just going to look at my hand or shake it like a normal person. “Mr. Orgun. But you can call me Drek.”

“Well, Mr. Drek.” I stiffen as he flinches, shoving both his big hands in his tailored pockets. “Er... Orgun. Mr. Orgun, feel free to warm up with the rest of the kids if you like. It’s what some of the parents who stick around do before we run drills.”

“No.” The word tears out of his mouth. I wonder if his stoic expression is forced.

This guy is dying to ask where your shoes are, I think and grab the whistle around my neck in an attempt to look professional.

“I’ve got to make it into the office in one piece, plus I’m not on the team.” He shrugs, then scowls as a dad starts running behind his daughter and niece, both on the team though the latter is a half-werewolf, unlike her full-blooded cousin.

“Stacy, growling won’t get you running faster!” I holler as Drek narrows his brows.

“I wouldn’t want just anyone running drills with my daughter. It’ll teach her poor form.”

I’m sure he’s just being a good dad, and I smile before blowing my whistle. “Haven’t you been paying attention, Mr. Orgun? Drills don’t include parents. The team needs to feel like a unit when growing and getting better.”

The orc doesn’t seem to mind when I walk away from him to get the girls in line.

“Does anyone want to take a turn playing goalie?” I ask with my hand raised.

“Me! Me!”

“I do! I do!”

“Coach! Coach! Over here! Pick me!”

I scratch my chin as I approach the three players begging to take the position, which includes a beaming Mursha, no doubt the best burgeoning goalie we have.

“How about we let Nanette give it a try, huh?” I say mostly to Mursha, hoping the gifted orc will understand that sharing opportunities helps build skills for everyone, not just her. After all, this is a team for kids, not professional athletes working to pay the bills with their athletic skills.

“I can do that!” she answers cheerily before her adorable face shifts from eagerness to confusion.

I turn to look behind me to find what caused the change of expression. I see Drek strutting up with a confused look on his face. “What about Mursha? She comes here to get better.”

“And she will. She does, every time she comes.” I finish my sentence by shooting each girl a smile. “Go on, Nanette. Mursha and I both believe in you.”

“Yeah! Yeah!” Mursha yells, playfully pushing her teammate toward the goal.

“Mursha, you’ll go after.” Drek’s comment catches me off guard, and now it’s my turn to blink at him. “Right?” he asks, hands on his hips and looking at me expectantly. “Coach?”

“Today’s about everyone,” I answer without looking at him. Once the girls scurry off, I give the concerned father an understanding grin before getting to the point. “And while this includes Mursha since the team wouldn’t be the same without her, I decide what happens in my office.” I gesture to the field.

My comment seems to take Drek by surprise, which squares with our whole exchange thus far. Except this time, his eyes widen slightly, and I’m almost positive he’s impressed. He might be the boss of some high rise, but I wear the whistle here, not him.

“Just make sure Mursha gets a turn.” He walks off. I wave at him as he turns back and frowns at me. Some parents protect their children in such confusing ways.

DREK

“**Y**ou should stay, Daddy! It’ll be all kinds of fun, fun, fun!”

I squeeze the steering wheel but smile at my precious little one. It’s not her fault work has me stressed. Though real estate development pays the bills, I wouldn’t call my work or what I do for it my reason for living.

But Mursha doesn’t need to know the details of my office life. Not at six years old, she doesn’t. Maybe someday, she’ll inherit the business from me like I did my pops, but so far, she’s more interested in sports and drawing than meetings and suits.

“Is that a ‘please’?” Though manners don’t get an orc everywhere in life, it’s important to know them, and I’m an avid supporter of teaching the ways of the world early where I can.

“It’s a pretty please! A pretty, pretty please! The prettiest please you’ve ever seen!”

“Okay, that doesn’t even make sense.” I chuckle and pat her little knee, though I’ve already decided it’s fine if I hang out at practice a bit.

Even if the coach is... different in her approach to sportsmanship. I can’t deny Mursha’s gotten even quicker on her feet, which is no doubt a product of the unconventional, shoeless Coach Abby. Maybe the bubbliest person I’ve ever seen on a field, the woman seemed more like a cheerleader than a coach. At least judging by yesterday’s practice.

“Stay, Daddy. Watch me block stuff.” She flexes her arm my way, then kisses it like she’s seen done on TV. I can’t help but chuckle.

“Then who will bring home the bacon?” I ask with a raised eyebrow. The field isn’t too far away now, but I pretend to still need some convincing.

“We already have bacon at home! We don’t need more bacon!” Her animated expressions tell me she means every word, and I don’t rightly know how to explain planning for the future to a six-year-old.

“Maybe not this week, but next week, what will we do?” She frowns up at me from her car seat in the back, and I hold her gaze in the rearview. “How would you get bacon?”

“Me?” she asks, then taps her chin with a little finger as if to really be mulling over the right answer. I wonder if it’s more mean than smart of me to force my daughter to think so hard, but planning is the cornerstone of survival.

The world won’t give her a break when she’s no longer a child, so what kind of father would I be to keep her from the tough questions? I’m doing this *for* Mursha, not *to* her.

“Well... I guess I’d get a pig,” she answers. “Then they can lay their bacon seeds at the house.”

“Bacon seeds?” I’m glad I’m not drinking the large coffee cooling in my cup holder. I’d have spat it out all over my freshly detailed dashboard.

“Yeah, the bacon strips don’t get flat until the pigs lay them. Then they roll out on the ground. Cordelia told me.” Her eyes light up. “Daddy, we should get a pig so we can have fresh bacon! We’ll buy one after practice, yeah?”

“Oh, so now I’m staying at practice?”

I pull into the parking lot and wonder when Mursha’s nanny, Mrs. Benson, will be back from her unexpected trip. Though I completely understand parents get sick, this is exactly what savings accounts are for. Hired nurses are ten times the help daughters are, even if said daughter is a nanny.

“Yeah, so we can get the pig after. Daddy, can I name the pig?”

“We’re not getting a pig. It was theoretical, my question.” I park and stare back at her. I should get a net for the house so she can practice there, too. It might save me the pain of standing through another one of Coach Sunshine Sparkle’s drills.

“Huh?” She’s already unbuckling herself.

I wonder if it’s smart of me to let her do so, but then again, one can never be too prepared. With just one parent, I’m all too aware that Mursha might grow up faster than other orcs her age. Her vocabulary and problem-solving skills are beyond the capabilities of her peers.

“I just wanted to know what your answer would be. But we don’t need a pig. I can buy bacon from the store. It was just an example. That’s all.” I unlock her car door, and she hops out almost as soon as I do.

“You’re weird, Daddy,” she offers me, then turns on her heel and bolts toward the field. “Come watch me block!” she hollers over her shoulder, and I realize she’s forgotten her sports bag.

I smirk and shake my head, unsure if I think the little genius actually forgot or not. She is her father’s daughter, after all, and it’s not beneath me to scheme and plot in an effort to get my way. How can I not be a little impressed? She’s doing exactly what I want her to — taking charge of the situation so the outcome is in her favor.

She has been listening... I ignore the rest of the parents and stand next to the bleachers. I don’t feel like sitting and ruining my suit, which is no doubt what I can expect the moment the fabric touches the metal stands. When was the last time these seats were sanitized? If ever?

“Well, well, well, nice to see you again,” a cheery voice sings.

I look up from my cell phone to see the coach, all 65 inches or so of her. The woman’s shoulder-length brown hair

complements her round facial features, and I wonder what got her into coaching in the first place. With the right accessories, she could be a sports model.

I shrug and look out onto the field, where my daughter is currently blocking two out of every three soccer balls inexpertly kicked her way. “Just want my daughter taken care of.” I don’t mean for the words to come out as accusatory as they do, but since I’m not one for apologizing, I don’t move to correct the tone.

“So we have something in common. Good.” She looks down at her perfectly manicured feet, bare and wiggling in the grass like the last time I saw her.

What kind of coach doesn’t dress for the part? I can’t imagine showing up to a job with bare feet.

“I got used to it a long time ago,” she explains before strutting off toward the goal. I hear her whistle blow as she motions for Mursha and the girl she called Nanette over. “Alright, Nanette, your turn. Mursha, let’s see some strong shots!”

She claps her hands a few times, and her enthusiasm rubs off on the rest. Even Mursha, who claps Nanette on the shoulder before joining the rest of the team. I fold my arms and hope Mursha isn’t too upset that I haven’t gotten her a net yet. Though she hasn’t necessarily asked for it, it’s my job as her father to anticipate what she needs. At least when I can.

I start texting the nanny, then realize she’s technically off the clock. My secretary’s schedule isn’t nearly as jam-packed as it normally is, so I shoot her a quick reminder to order something for the house.

Mursha needs a net for soccer. She won’t get better if she doesn’t practice on her own time. Something sturdy and durable. Let’s get her some more gear while we’re at it.

“Uh oh!” I hear a little werewolf youngling holler as another teammate, a human with bright blond hair in pigtails, rushes over to where three girls hover over another player.

I look around for my daughter and practically sail toward the group as I realize the one on the ground is Mursha.

“Mursha!” Her name comes out like a growl despite the fact I’m concerned. It’s how I sound whether I’m angry, worried, happy, or just ready for bed. “Mursha—”

“Well, we can still move it. That’s good,” the coach interrupts me. “Does it hurt if you make circles?”

Coach Sunshine Sparkle rolls her right ankle back and forth, and I heave a sigh of relief as my little girl does the same.

“I’m okay, Dad. We’re working it out!” I’m suddenly painfully aware no one else’s parents are on the field. I frown down at Mursha before squatting at her side.

“Nobody solves a problem like I do.” She doesn’t need to understand why I’m here. Mursha can thank me later when she’s old enough to see that the things I do, I do for her. “Does it hurt when I do this?” I poke and prod at her ankle, and she pulls her leg back in what I think is pain.

“Dad! That hurts!”

She kicks at me as Sunshine Sparkle ignores my presence entirely. I watch the woman rub her chin and frown down at my daughter’s ankle, which is no doubt swollen. It’s what I get for letting her choose the team she’s on. Why didn’t I vet the league? Every one of the kids while I’m at it?

“Okay, the real test. Let’s stretch our toes up. Slowly if you need to. We’ve got time.” Coach Abby shows Mursha with her own foot, and so do half the kids standing around.

“That’s not bad. My butt hurts more than anything.”

“You said butt!” two girls to my right say in unison.

The rest of the team laughs, leaving me nothing better to do but shoot glances at the coach. Why is she smiling? Shaking her head, now that I agree with. But smiling?

“Wouldn’t it be funny if that was our team name? The butts?” I have no idea the name of the future dishwasher who said this. What kind of a comment is that?

“I feel better!” Mursha says as she allows a few of her peers, including the one who suggested the crude team name, to pull her to her feet.

The rest of the practice goes by in a flash, though I can't say I agree with Sunshine Sparkle's chaotic approach to scrimmages. But after Mursha scores a goal, I'm left wondering if the woman might be more than a glorified babysitter after all.

ABBY

“Take that! And that! And that!”

“You tell him, Charlie!” I yell to my niece, Felicity, currently pretending to best a tree in a sword fight.

Her pirate name is Charlie, the reason for which has yet to be explained to me. But since her cocoa and my coffee won't drink themselves, I'll sip them both and let her get around to her backstory. She notices I'm indulging in her black and white hot chocolate, heavy on the whipped cream and candy cane sprinkles, and points to the tree rather than chide me.

“You think you're better than me?” she hollers, and I quietly wonder which streaming show or YouTube channel she got that from. “You think you're better than me just because you command a fleet and I, a single pirate ship? I bested you fair and square. You and your fleet!”

I whoop and holler, pumping my fist high overhead, despite the looks I'm getting from the joggers along one of the park's many trails. They don't know me or Captain Charlie, and they sure as hell don't know Felicity.

“Top of the morning, matey!” I say to the cyclist currently pedaling past me. “A good day for some revenge.”

“Revenge!” Felicity turns from her tree foe and bolts after the cyclist.

“Banana Bunny! Banana Bunny!” We decided long ago that our more aggressive play times require a safe word of some kind. So far, it's worked like a charm.

“Too much?” she asks, breaking character as fast as the wide-eyed cyclist could escape down the path.

“Sorry!” I yell as loud as I can.

“I wonder if banana bunny made it worse, Aunty.” She looks up at me and squints. I cup a hand over her brow to block the sun.

“I think you might be right.”

“Can I play?” an exasperated voice asks from behind me.

I turn to see Mursha standing there while her disinterested nanny looks at her phone while leaning on a nearby tree. And I smile because I know it’s the polite thing to do.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Mursha Orgun. Allow me to introduce you to my niece, Fe—”

“Captain Charlie Javier Bardem and you are?” Felicity cocks an eyebrow, and I remember my own alter ego.

“And Fillius Vincemister, quartermaster of the park on Magnolia Park Lane.” I gesture to the street sign near the intersection to my left.

“Pompl for short. Welcome aboard my ship,” Felicity says. “You can call me Captain.”

“And me Vincemister,” I add.

“I call her Mr. Vince,” Felicity explains, then shrugs as if my playing is weirder than hers is. Not thirty seconds ago, she was fighting a tree. “It’s just easier that way.”

I mouth ‘Vincemister’ to Mursha while Felicity asks what her pirate name will be.

“Mursha!” Mursha offers, and I frown over at the nanny.

“We’ll work on that, Mursha,” I say.

Even with the girl’s name being called, Mrs. Benson doesn’t seem eager to earn her keep. Just as I’m about to casually walk over and engage Mrs. Benson in chit-chat, which I’ve done countless times before because I’m nothing if not inclusive, the nanny looks up.

I wave at her, and she politely waves back with a half-hearted flick of the wrist, followed by a curt nod. I smile a little since it's more than what I've gotten the last two times she's dropped Mursha off for practice.

"How ya doing?" I holler as Felicity tugs at my sweater.

"Mr. Vince, now's not the time to engage in pleasantries with the cabana boys." She gestures to Mrs. Benson as Mursha covers a smile behind her hand. "We're in the heat of battle. Quick! He's untying himself!"

"Oh, no!" Mursha runs off to help my imaginative niece subdue the sedentary tree.

"Thought you could get away, did you!" I holler as the girls run around the tree and howl like dogs, no doubt in an effort to strike fear into the heart of their verdant foe.

A gust of wind blows my hair back as a few leaves fall from the tree's generous branches. The girls look overhead at the same time, then stare at each other as if they've been caught in a sniper's target.

"Ah!" they both scream, and I laugh, making sure to throw Mrs. Benson a thumbs up. She's probably wondering what I'm doing with her charge.

The woman looks up, then back down at her phone as casually as if she weren't involved with us at all. Does Mursha's father really think he's doing his daughter a favor by leaving her with this type of caregiver?

Though I'm the first to admit our approaches to childcare are vastly different, I'm not ignorant of the struggles of single parenthood. It's enough that he's there for Mursha in the ways that work for her, not me. But still, Mrs. Benson? He's worried about the way I run practices, and he's got Mrs. Benson watching over his beloved offspring? Some people and their priorities.

Or blindspots, I think, wondering if I should give the orc the benefit of the doubt. I'm sure Mrs. Benson is extremely present when the boss is around. That's got to be why she's still around.

“Wait!” Felicity hollers, running over to pretend-tie-up the tree trunk. “We’ll be back. Don’t think I don’t know about the treasure!”

“There’s treasure?” Mursha’s eyes go wide as I nod, doing my best to meet her enthusiasm.

“There has to be treasure. We’re playing pirates!” I explain.

“You can’t have the same name as your regular name. We need a pirate name, so they don’t know your real identity,” Felicity says, just like I told her when we started this game of ‘the whole park is my pirate ship.’ “You know, just in case the commodore decides to follow us back to our hideout.”

I explain to Mursha what a hideout is, as well as ask her a few choice questions to land on a good pirate name.

“What’s your favorite color?”

“Rainbow!” she says quickly.

“That’s technically a pattern,” Felicity says, adjusting her glasses like she’s seventy and not seven. “Oh! I like it. Pattern.”

“Rainbow Pattern!” Mursha’s hopping up and down. I’m too busy laughing to cast another glance toward Mrs. Benson.

“Let’s make you a quartermaster, then. Shall we?” Felicity clasps her hands behind her back and begins to pace. I wonder what cartoon villain she’d seen do the very same move while sizing up their comrades.

“What’s a quartermaster?” Mursha’s pronunciation is darling, and I do my best to explain the position at a six-year-old level.

“It’s an important job,” Felicity adds, giving Mursha just the encouragement she needs to take on the role.

“Quartermaster Bow, may I present you with a gift then? For your first day on the job,” I begin as I pull out an imaginary sword and proffer it up to her with care. “A great, good sword. I hope the jewels aren’t too much.”

“I love it, Finchmister!” Mursha retorts, and I don’t have the heart to correct her. What’s important is the playtime, not the details. “I get to be a pirate for a whole hour while daddy’s at work. Ah!” She holds her invisible sword up high and charges toward the tree, mock-fighting various allies of the tree.

“She needs help, Captain! There’s someone behind her!” I say as Felicity charges into the thick of it.

She swings her own make-believe sword in the direction that I pointed, and soon, I’m chuckling at their exuberance. Maybe we could play government agents or cowgirls next. Who knows? But hopefully, Mursha will be able to join.

It seems like the hour flies by, and soon, Drek has arrived. I’m shocked to see Mrs. Benson stay only to chat with the orc briefly before walking off toward her own car. Isn’t she going to say goodbye to her charge? What kind of nanny is she?

“Daddy! Guess my pirate name!” Mursha yells as she sails toward her well-coiffed father. Does the orc ever wear anything but business suits? I’m surprised the pinstriped ensemble didn’t come with a hat, but I bite back the urge to inquire about it aloud.

“Time’s up, doll,” he says in reply, though to his credit, he does put his cell phone away to scoop her up and into his arms.

“Bow. Like the colors in the sky.”

“How cute is that?” he says absentmindedly, and she nods vigorously before pointing to the tree.

“Our prisoner,” she explains.

I get a look for that and step forward with a smile to explain the importance of play. Felicity knows full well, or at least full well for a kid, how dangerous and disenchanting the true pirates of the time were. But I don’t see anything wrong with suspending disbelief, and at the same time letting the child explore their wild side.

Little girls pretend to be witches who eat children and live in solitude, but we don’t run to get them committed. Or expect

them to grow up and build a candy cabin in the woods. Before I know it, I'm explaining this to Drek, who seems completely confused if not disinterested in my argument.

Obviously, he thinks what Mrs. Benson does is childcare, as in babysitting eighties style — meaning little engagement and maybe a puff or two on a joint when no one's watching. Mrs. Benson sure seems to feel the same way, and I wonder how this successful businessman could be so close-minded about child development.

“I just think it's important to nurture Mursha's curiosity and confidence through play,” I explain.

“And does it always include screaming at the top of your lungs?” He puts Mursha down to give her a chance to say goodbye to her new friend. Or who I hope will be her new friend. Felicity doesn't take to just anyone.

“When we're playing pirates? Absolutely. Sometimes more than once. Isn't that right, Felicity?”

“I run a fair but tight ship,” she explains.

I look back at Drek and shrug. “Whatever that means.”

“You can say that again,” he says, gesturing for Mursha to take his hand. I chew my lower lip and wonder if there's ever a time when the stiff but caring father is playful.

DREK

It really is amazing how one little thing can put such a wrench in a perfectly tuned machine. And that seems truer than ever now, staring down at the resignation letter in my hands. The note is short, simple, and wholly irritating.

I quit. Find someone else to push around. Good luck.

The nanny just up and left without a word, only leaving the passive-aggressive note behind. It really is indecent. It's one thing to quit, it's another to leave so unexpectedly and without warning.

Now I have no one to watch Mursha. In a week when she begins school, I'll only need someone for a few hours in the morning and evening, but I still need a plan. And something to do with her in the meantime.

"I'll call one of the nanny services," my assistant, Jasmine, offers as soon as I let her know. "I'm sure they have someone more than qualified to watch your daughter."

"Our last nanny came from one of those services. Clearly, they can't be relied on to actually provide quality service," I growl out.

"Well then... I could set up an interview process and start looking through potential nannies personally. With your final approval, of course," she suggests.

My jaw tightens minutely. "And how long would that take?"

My assistant stutters for a moment. “Probably three days at least, but I could try and speed up the process if you want!”

Three days. It could be worse, I suppose.

“Don’t you know anyone who is reliable and can work for the time being?” I ask Jasmine.

She cringes. “No, sir, I’m afraid not.”

I wipe a hand down my face and let out an irritated sigh. “Very well. Start the process of finding another nanny and interviewing them, I suppose. And make sure they are actually worth my time.”

“Absolutely, sir. I’ll get right on that.” And then she scrambles away to comply.

Sitting back heavily in my chair, I stare at the note again. I glare at the thing, wishing it would turn into the nanny so I could scream at her.

A door opens to my office. “Daddy! Where’s the bathroom?”

I can already tell I’m going to have a migraine by the end of the day. Since Mrs. Benson couldn’t be bothered to give fair warning that she was going to leave, Mursha had to come to the office after school.

“Didn’t I just ask you if you had to go ten minutes ago?” I ask as patiently as my growing annoyance allows.

She shrugs. “I have to go now.”

With a deep sigh, I point to a door not too far from me. “I have one in my office right there. Don’t make a mess.”

“I won’t!” And with that, she races into the bathroom.

When Mursha finally emerges from the bathroom, she’s not wearing the clothes she went in there with.

“Why are you in your soccer uniform?” I ask her.

She looks at me as if I’ve just asked a silly question. “Because it’s almost time for my soccer practice. You didn’t forget, right?”

“No, I didn’t forget. But since your nanny decided to quit on us, you aren’t going today since you have no one to take you.”

A stubborn, defiant look comes across her face, and she crosses her arms. “You’re here. Why can’t *you* take me to soccer practice?”

“Because I’m very busy right now, Mursha. You’ll go again once you have a new nanny.”

“And how long is that?”

“Hopefully soon,” I say tiredly. Then things can go back to how they were. Mursha will have her schedule, and I will have mine.

She pouts and then shuffles closer to me. “But you came last time. And the time before. Please, can’t you take me again just one more time?”

Her look is so pitiful, and she makes a compelling negotiation.

“I really want you to see me play. Please, Dad, can’t you come one more time?” she pushes.

Well, it’s not like I was going to get any more work done here anyway.

“Very well,” I relent. “I’ll take you to your soccer practice.”

Instantly, her pout is gone. “Yay! We need to hurry it up then, or we’ll be late. Come on!”

Mursha babbles the whole way over and practically zooms out of the car once we get there. She heads straight for her soccer coach, who she wraps in a hug before chatting up a storm with her. Instead of being irritated or awkward, Coach Sunshine Sparkles smiles and listens as if she is genuinely interested.

And maybe she is.

She also manages to easily redirect Mursha’s attention to soccer practice. I know from experience how difficult it is to

get Mursha to do something when her mind is on something else. And yet this woman does it with ease. She also seems to have no trouble corralling the rest of the children as well.

I frown as I remember our little interaction on the playground. She seems to have a very different way of teaching children. Definitely not the way I would handle things, and yet somehow, it seems to hold their attention.

Even now, she's able to keep a group of kindergarteners focused on learning how to play soccer. And they seem to be enjoying it as well.

Mursha in particular seems fascinated with her. Anything Abby asks them to do, Mursha tries to be the best one at it. When they have a break, Mursha only wants to talk to her.

Abby seems to have created quite an impressive rapport with Mursha.

Then an idea comes to me. At first, I dismiss it right away. But as I watch Abby and Mursha more and more, the idea begins to take root in my mind.

Abby could be the answer to my nanny problem.

She isn't perfect, a little too unorthodox for my tastes, but Mursha already likes her. More than that, Mursha *listens* to her. And she wouldn't have to be the permanent nanny, just someone to hold us over until we can find someone else.

I weigh the pros and cons in my mind, and by the time soccer practice ends, I know the answer.

Abby's handing out little treats to all the kids and congratulating them on a good practice as I walk over. Mursha, of course, is all but glued to her side.

"Excuse me. Abby, isn't it?" Her head snaps up at my voice. Her gaze becomes wary, and the slightest bit of annoyance flashes through her eyes.

It's gone just as quickly, though, and she puts on a smile. "It is. How can I help you?"

"Our nanny recently quit, and I was wondering if you would be able to fill in as Mursha's temporary nanny? You

would be paid well for your time, of course.”

She doesn't try to hide the surprise on her face. For a moment, she seems at a loss for words. Mursha, though, is never at a loss for words.

“Yes, yes, yes! That would be perfect.” She grabs onto her coach's arm. “Please say yes, please, please, please. You'd be the perfect nanny!”

Abby gets over her shock and smiles, though it's clearly for Mursha's sake. “Umm, well, this is very unexpected.”

“Yes, as was Mrs. Benson's abrupt departure. We'd like someone who can start as soon as possible.”

Abby glances between me and Mursha and then back to me. “I don't know. I mean, I'm a little surprised you're even asking me in the first place. Especially with how things have gone the last few times we've talked. Our styles are quite different.”

There's a slight bit of irritation in her tone, just enough so I pick up on it but Mursha doesn't.

“Yes, I'm aware,” I ground out. “But Mursha seems to listen to you, as do the rest of these children. If you are able to do that, then you must be doing something right.”

She hesitates again but glances down at Mursha. The girl, still hanging off her arm, gives her one of her best pouts.

I can tell it's the moment Abby's resolve breaks. “Alright, I'll be your temporary nanny.”

Mursha instantly lights up. “Yay! You're going to be the nanny ever! We can play games and watch movies and make snacks and play in mud puddles –”

“Mursha,” I begin, a hint of a warning in my voice. “Just because you're going to have a new nanny doesn't mean your rules and schedule change.”

Abby narrows her eyes. “What sort of rules?”

“I'm glad you asked. Best to get the rules and regulations out of the way first, so there will be no misunderstandings.

First of all, everything you do must be run by me beforehand. This includes outdoor times and where and how long you plan to go out, including anywhere on my property.”

I can feel the look of disbelief Coach Sunshine gives me. I ignore it. “Secondly, Mursha is only allowed a single education program a day. I bought a series of introductions to proper etiquette that I recommend. Third, there are items I don’t approve of for the household. Playdoh, for example. I don’t condone messy play. Fourth—”

“Whoa, whoa, hold on a minute.”

I’m taken aback a bit by Abby’s sudden yet firm interruption. “Excuse me?”

“Look, I don’t know what kind of prep school you think you’re running in your house, but those rules are just plain ridiculous,” she says.

I open my mouth to protest that they most certainly are not, but Abby plows ahead. “I get we need to tell you where we’re going, but if it’s to the backyard, then we’re just going to go. As for how long, why set a timer on fun? Do you know how many parents wish their kids would play in the backyard longer?”

She shakes her head. “And really? Etiquette? I get manners but she’s four. And on that note, of course, there’s going to be a mess sometimes. That doesn’t mean we won’t clean it up at the end of the day.”

Abby takes a step closer to me. “So you’re going to have to bend your rules a little bit if you want me to work with you. Okay?”

I should feel irritated, but instead, I can’t help but be a bit impressed. It’s not often someone stands up to me so readily. And not just for their own benefit but for Mursha’s. Besides, do I really have a choice right now? It’s either her or me.

I give her a curt nod. “Very well. We shall *compromise*.”

ABBY

Driving towards Mursha's house, I still can't believe I actually agreed to be her nanny. Well, maybe not completely. Mursha's a great kid who seems like she really needs a friend in her life. Especially considering how her father acts.

And that really is the kicker. Her father.

Drek Orgun is one of the most mule-headed people I've ever met. He's full of himself, distant, and the antithesis of open-minded. And now I'm going to be working for him.

Why did I say yes? Why did I think this would be a good idea?

It's for Mursha. You're doing this for Mursha, I remind myself. And it's only temporary. Just something to help keep everything on track.

The GPS chimes that my destination is just up on the left. I look up and —

“Oh my...” I really don't know what I'm getting into. Just to be sure, I check the scrap piece of paper I wrote the address down on because surely they can't live *here*.

But as it turns out, the address matches. I'm in the right place. Though I don't think I've ever been more out of place.

I pull in through the massive archway that leads to the house. I suppose *house* isn't really how I would describe it. Fancy-mansion-that-borders-on-a-castle is more like it.

It takes me a moment to figure out where I'm supposed to park. It feels like I'm illegally parking by leaving my beat-up old car next to this immaculate architecture.

The stairs leading up to the house are frankly too many stairs to get to a house that's on a pretty level property. Unsurprisingly, the doors are massive. I awkwardly ring the bell, hoping that's what I'm supposed to do, and wonder where the cameras are. A place like this must have cameras everywhere.

My mind already begins to spin, wondering how long I'll have to commit to this. As a recently graduated teacher, I'm still looking for a permanent job. This means I have plenty of spare time right now when school isn't in session.

Even when the school year starts, I'm only an on-call substitute for the time being, and I can delay taking jobs if Mursha needs me more. But how long do I really want to work in a place like this? It makes my skin itchy just looking at the sprawling exterior.

After a minute of uncomfortable standing outside, wondering if I should ring the bell again or not, the door opens. To my relief, it's Mursha, not Drek, on the other side.

The girl grins. "You made it! Come in."

She tugs me inside before I can reply.

The inside of the mansion is just as impressive as the outside, with tall ceilings and what I assume is priceless art everywhere. I feel like I've stepped into a museum. Or a party at Bruce Wayne's manor that I wasn't actually invited to.

I glance down at my clothes, wondering if I should have worn something fancier. I quickly shake the thought away. I'm here to babysit, not attend a gala.

"You're going to love it here!" Mursha tells me excitedly. "I made a list of things we can do, and games we can play, and ___"

"Mursha, we already had this talk."

I grimace at the voice. There's Drek. Great.

He stands at the top of one of the staircases, his signature scowl already on his face. Granted, from what I've seen, the full extent of his emotional range is grumpy, stubborn, annoyed, and then a mix of all three.

Drek walks down the stairs, his disapproving gaze locked onto me. Suddenly, despite the giant room and tall ceilings, I feel almost claustrophobic under his stare.

"You know the rules here, as per our discussion yesterday," he says, voice firm. Did he forget my amendment to his rules? "You will only engage in activities that stimulate your mind and help you grow either in your education or mannerisms."

I set my jaw. There's no way I'm going to let him push me around the first minute I get here.

"I thought we already had that discussion?" I make sure to make my voice equally firm. "I thought we were going to compromise?"

He raises an eyebrow. "We are. I'll allow you to try things your way, provided you don't stray too far from the rules we've established. And remember that the housekeeping staff has their own assigned duties, which do not include picking up after you and Mursha all day."

I grit my teeth in an effort to tell him that that's not how compromises work. But I swallow down my protests for Mursha's sake.

Putting on my best smile, I sling my bag off my shoulder. "Actually, I brought something fun and educational to do." I turn my attention to Mursha. "How would you like me to show you how to make a flower?"

Mursha's eyes light up. "That sounds like fun!"

"Don't you mean *grow* a flower?" Drek asks. "You don't *make* flowers, you grow them. We already have a perfectly well-maintained garden, you don't need to plant anything else."

I bite back a groan. I'm not sure if the man is intentionally being difficult or if he's just this literal.

“No, I mean *make* a flower,” I say with all the patience I can muster. “This is a craft.”

He frowns. “But why –”

“How about I show you and then you’ll see?” I interrupt before we can go around in circles again.

His frown deepens, but he doesn’t argue. Mursha shows me to the kitchen, and I pull out the art supplies I brought with me. Something told me Mursha would be severely lacking in supplies of her own.

I show her how to fold the paper and then cut it out in such a way that makes it look like a flower. Drek, meanwhile, all but breathes down my neck. By the end of the craft, Mursha is ecstatic.

“Daddy, look! My flower is pink and green!” She shows off her work proudly.

“The green is usually a part of the leaves and the stem. It’s not quite accurate. And I’m not certain which flower it is you were going for.”

I suppress the urge to ruffle my eyes. “It’s a craft. For *fun*,” I say slowly, trying to get him to take the hint.

“I thought it was also supposed to be educational,” he counters.

I sigh. Fair. I smile at Mursha. “Do you know why we need plants?”

She doesn’t hesitate. “Because they’re pretty!”

I laugh. Sometimes kids have the best logic. “They can be very pretty and bring us a lot of happiness, which is important. But they also provide us with oxygen which helps keep us alive.”

Mursha marvels at her little paper flower. “Cool!”

I look at Drek. “There, education and fun.”

He doesn’t argue, and that’s progress. I think.

“Can we go in the garden?” Mursha asks. “I want to thank them for the air.”

“The plants can’t speak,” Drek protests.

“Actually, it’s supposedly really good for plants if you talk to them,” I counter. “So I think it’s a great idea.”

Drek makes a noise like he’s unconvinced, but he jerks his head in a nod all the same.

They really do have well-maintained gardens. Very well-maintained. It looks like it could be on a magazine cover.

Mursha starts going around to all the plants, thanking them, saying hello, and having little conversations with them. It’s utterly adorable, and she’s clearly having fun. I risk a glance at Drek beside me who is, of course, frowning.

“Oh, come on. What could you possibly have a problem with now? She’s not even making a mess.”

He shakes his head. “I just don’t think it’s a good idea to let her make friends with the plants. It’s not a relationship that will end well.”

This time, I can’t help but roll my eyes. “Oh for the love of... she’s not making friends with them, she’s just using her imagination. That’s what kids do.”

“I suppose,” he says after a minute. “Just so long as she doesn’t get in the dirt and mess up her clothes.”

I lift my head. “Doesn’t she have any play clothes?”

“Play clothes? You want me to buy her a whole other wardrobe for play?”

I should have known better. “They’re clothes she can play in and get dirty. You know, so she doesn’t mess up her nice clothes.”

He raises an eyebrow and repeats himself. “You want me to buy her clothes that she’s intentionally going to get dirty.”

“Yes!”

“That makes no sense.”

I let out a long sigh. I don't know why I bother.

Drek looks at his watch and frowns. Then he calls out to Mursha. "Mursha, it's time we go inside and watch an episode of your show. Come on, we've had enough of this."

Mursha groans and slowly trudges back. Is this the etiquette series he was talking about?

Sure enough, it is. And it's boring, even for me. After ten minutes, I can't take it. Grabbing the remote, I shut it off. "That's it, we're going to the park so you can play like a normal kid."

Mursha cheers, and Drek stands up abruptly. "That is not part of the schedule."

"Well, unless putting us all to sleep is on the schedule, it is now," I argue, not letting him have an inch.

We stare each other down for a moment. I sigh. "Look at her. Look at how excited she is. Surely you want that for her?"

His face softens a bit. Then he pinches the bridge of his nose. "Fine."

Twenty minutes later, we sit together on the bench as Mursha runs and plays. I grin up at Drek. "See, she's having fun."

He gives me a stern look. "Don't assume my rules exist only for my sake. She is all I have, and I intend to give her the best life I can. One where she is not illusioned with the world and can know how to smartly navigate it."

His admission takes me back. Up until now, I almost assumed he just didn't really like raising a kid. But clearly, that's not the case.

He turns his attention back to Mursha, watching her play. His gaze is intense but also a bit uncertain.

Maybe he really is trying to be a good parent. Maybe he thinks this is what it looks like. They don't seem to have a lot of playtime and laughter, but maybe that's because he doesn't know how.

He obviously cares a great deal about his daughter. Maybe he just needs to be shown how to bring a little sunshine into their lives.

I sit up straighter, a new determination rising within me. As long as I'm here, I'm going to do my best to bring that warmth into their lives. For both their sakes.

DREK

I don't make a habit of leaving work early. Long nights at the office are simply second nature to me. Not to mention a marker of good work ethic. Any honest man should be proud to put in half the hours I do.

But work was achingly slow today, and I feel a nagging sense of dread that something has gone wrong at home. Yesterday's little unannounced outing was a nightmare. Anyone who knows anything about childcare should know the number one thing they require is structure. A sudden trip to the park may be fun at the moment, but it can also have devastating consequences for her long-term development.

So I'm choosing to take off early today to drop in on Abby and Mursha. If I see anything less than a spotless house and strict adherence to the day's schedule, it will require swift and unapologetic correction. Not to mention a mark on her future performance review.

My heart sinks as I open my front door. The smell hits me immediately. Chocolate and butter.

Whatever is baking in the kitchen is already a strike against Abby. "Mursha is only allowed sweet treats on special occasions and certainly never this early in the day," I mutter as if I need the reminder. "And the chef can't be pleased that Abby is in his kitchen."

This is her allotted time for piano practice, and I most certainly do not hear the sound of scales. What I do see is a pile of Mursha's toys scattered across the living room.

I remove my shoes and place my briefcase in its proper storage location before walking straight to the large kitchen doors. As I open them, the blended aromas congeal into the unmistakable smell of freshly baked cookies.

My fists clench. The kitchen is a ridiculous mess! Bowls, whisks, and measuring utensils are stacked in the sink, dough hardening on their sides. Flour and sugar litter the countertops while chocolate stains the stovetop. Whatever happened to clean as you go? Any decent culinarian worth his fee in service knows that!

But as I open my jaw to bellow out my anger, the force is caught dead in my throat at the sound of Mursha's laughter. She's standing on a stepstool, wearing an apron that's several sizes too big for her. And she's licking a dough-covered spoon.

My mind explodes in a flurry of panic over salmonella and other diseases borne from uncooked eggs and flour. But Mursha is doubled over in laughter, and it chases away the negativity clouding my thoughts.

Abby takes a small bit of dough on her finger and plops it onto the tip of Mursha's nose, eliciting even louder and uncontrollable laughter.

"Hi, Daddy!" Mursha calls. Her smile wavers as her eyes dart around the kitchen. She knows the mess is unacceptable, and my sudden appearance has shed a spotlight on every single inch.

But Abby simply looks back at me with a warm smile and zero awareness of the situation.

"Oh, hey, Drek," she says casually. "I just pulled the first batch from the oven a few minutes ago. Nice and fresh. Want one?"

I cringe. I'm following my own strict diet and exercise routine, and there isn't any room for an impromptu cookie this week.

"No," I reply. Mursha looks at me like I just threw her favorite doll onto the roof.

“But I worked so hard! You gotta try one. Here!” She picks up one of the cookies from the cooling rack and holds it up for me. “Please, Daddy! Just try it!”

No matter how hard I try, I simply cannot say no to her little green face and big blue eyes. I reluctantly accept the cookie and take a bite. It’s... incredible. It’s like no cookie I’ve ever tasted before. It takes all of my willpower not to smile and beg to know what Abby’s secret is.

In spite of my composure, there must be something telling in my face. Abby is looking at me slyly. She knows full well I love it.

“Alright, Mursha, there’s only one more tray that needs to go in the oven. So it’s time for us to clean all of this up,” Abby says calmly.

“Huh? Aw, no way! Can’t we make more? I wanna make snickerdoodles this time.” Mursha’s childishness comes back, and I’m just about ready to send her to her room for the act of defiance.

But Abby beats me to it. “Now, we promised, remember? One batch of chocolate chip cookies, then we do piano practice. And breaking promises isn’t nice, is it?” she asks.

Mursha pulls on her apron. The storm is obviously brewing behind her eyes, ready to lash out like a hurricane of violence and tears. But instead, Mursha nods and pulls her apron off.

“Yes, Miss Abby,” she says. Mursha hands her dirty, chocolate-and-flour-stained apron over to Abby, who puts it in the dirty linen basket. “But cleaning isn’t fun. You said we’d just have fun today.”

Again, I feel a boiling rage in my veins. Mursha’s behavior is embarrassing. She knows better than to demand so much from her nannies, especially when they’ve already crossed the line in service of having fun over her studies.

“Well, why don’t we make it fun? Hmm, I know! Why don’t we pretend we’re kitchen maids in a grand castle? Here, let me just...” Abby takes a clean apron from the closet and

ties it with a big, fanciful bow in the back. Then she ties a handkerchief around Mursha's head. "Now you're all dressed up and ready to clean the castle."

"Yeah, 'cause the king is big and mean, and he might chop off our heads if we don't!" Mursha cries. She grabs her step stool and places it in front of an especially messy countertop. Abby hands her a cleaning rag, and the two get to work.

The implication of who the big mean king could be is not lost on me. But I also can't argue with the results. Mursha isn't just cleaning up her mess. She's doing so with a big smile and loud giggles. She even tries to handle the broom by herself, without much success, but still.

"Lady Abby, do you fancy any of the boys in the court?" Mursha asks in a terrible English accent. I have to wonder where she learned these terms. Did her last nanny watch British dramas on television?

Abby laughs while taking the last tray of cookies from the oven. "Oh, no. I don't think so, Miss Mursha. I'm simply far too busy minding the castle to think about love."

"That's quite a shame," Mursha says. "Kitchen's all clean! I need to tidy the... uh... ballroom now! Before the Queen's ball that starts in fifteen minutes!"

Abby makes a large show of acting shocked. "That soon? We better hurry then!" After placing the tray down and removing her oven mitts, Abby follows Mursha into the living room where the two grab a basket and fill it with Mursha's assorted toys.

Mursha completes, in less than five minutes, a task that normally requires an hour of threats, bargaining, and ultimatums to get done. I have to admit my surprise. Abby's methods may be strange and chaotic, but she certainly gets results. I suppose I chose her for a reason, after all.

But I still believe there needs to be some sort of further structure to this approach. The kitchen did not need to be so filthy in the first place, and Mursha should have put away her dolls before she retrieved her building blocks to play. I make a

mental note to compliment Abby on her overall results, but I also continue to criticize her lack of focus on the finer details of organization in my head.

I'm sure she will appreciate the honest feedback when I get around to telling her.

"Alright," Abby says cheerfully as she motions Mursha to come to her. She does and throws herself into a big hug. "Let me get you out of your maid clothes. The Queen needs music for her ball, and now you're the master pianist!"

Mursha giggles a little immaturely at the word but nods in agreement. "I need to change first." She rushes upstairs and leaves us alone for a few minutes.

"Happy now?" Abby asks.

I look at her with one eyebrow crooked up. "What do you mean? That you fixed your mistake?"

Abby smiles and shakes her head in defiance. "I told you there'd be messes. Raising kids is messy. But what matters is cleaning them up when we're done. Plus, how is she ever going to learn how to clean up her own messes if she isn't allowed to make them in the first place?"

I look down at Abby with a pointed gaze. It's obvious this conversation is no longer about baking supplies and scattered toys.

I simply grunt in understanding as my little princess descends the stairs in her sparkling blue dress. It's all tulle and glitter, and she always looks so happy when she gets to wear it. She's also tied a blanket around her neck like a cape.

"Introduce me!" she whispers from the banister.

"Oh, excuse me. Ladies and gentlemen of the royal court, may I introduce to you the greatest pianist in the entire realm, Lady Mursha Orgun!"

Mursha holds her skirt in her hands as she descends the stairs, whispering thank yous to an invisible audience. She then takes her seat at the piano, something that is normally a struggle to get her to do, and raises the lid over the keys.

“This ballad is called, um, Itsy Bitsy Spider.”

Abby takes a seat on the couch, her hands folded neatly in her lap as if she were in fact a lady in a castle listening to the court musician play. I join her and marvel as Mursha goes from song to song without any whining or fidgeting.

She’s simply practicing, like she’s supposed to be.

“You just need to meet her at her level,” Abby states quietly between songs. “Sometimes that means letting her guide the day instead of following a list.”

I’m not sure I completely agree. But I’m certainly beginning to understand.

ABBY

When Drek insisted on following mine and Mursha's outing to the aquarium, I considered it a fantastic idea. *Wow, I thought. How great to see Drek take an active role in Mursha's interests outside of his stringent curriculum! It'll be nice for him to be included on one of her last summer activities before school starts, too.*

But now, as Drek tailgates my car on the way there, I can already feel the creeping dread of truth. Drek isn't coming in order to spend time with his daughter. He's tagging along to supervise *me*.

I huff in frustration. Glancing in my rearview mirror, I can see Drek looking upset as well. I don't understand why! I've been following every rule of the road and playing it safe with Mursha in my backseat.

"Why is Daddy taking his own car?" she asks from her car seat.

"Just in case he gets called in to work. You know how busy he gets. Isn't it exciting that he took time away to see the fish with us?"

"Yeah!" Mursha cheers. She's completely oblivious to the truth of the matter. Drek took his own car so he could monitor my driving. I'm sure on the next outing, he'll insist on riding in the passenger side so he can comment from that perspective as well.

I'm almost, just barely, starting to feel a slight sense of regret. But then I hear Mursha laugh as she points at a family

of ducks and that feeling washes away. She's simply so adorable and precious. Someone with a sense of joy needs to be looking out for her.

We pull into the aquarium parking lot and, as I'm helping Mursha out, Drek walks over and hovers at my side.

"You failed to use your blinker while turning onto Myrtle Street," he comments sternly.

I roll my eyes and lift Mursha into my arms. "It was a turn-only lane. Everyone already knew I was turning. And besides, I used my blinker every other time."

"You should use it every *single* time. And you drove approximately two miles under the speed limit while passing the library on Strawberry Avenue." Drek folds his arms and scowls at me as if I'd run over an old woman crossing the street.

"Mursha wanted to see the ducks."

"That's no excuse for poor driving."

"Are you going to be like this all day?" I ask, narrowing my eyes at him. "Because we came here to learn and have fun. And your negativity is going to hinder both of those goals."

Drek looks at me, clearly offended, and opens his mouth to give me a piece of his mind in return.

"Dad!" Mursha yells, interrupting his unsolicited critique. "Did you know that, um, ducks go like this? Quack quack quack." She punctuates her impression by flapping her arms like a bird. Her adorable display shuts Drek right up. Even he isn't immune to her childish charms.

We pay for admission and make our way inside the large, blue building. Mursha is overly eager and quickly scampers to the river otter exhibit.

"Oh, one moment, kiddo," I say while taking her by the hand. "Do you see that line? There are other people waiting to get to the front of the tank. We have to wait, too."

"No we don't," Drek says. He picks Mursha up and walks her to the tank, pushing other parents aside as he does so. My

face goes beet red in embarrassment. Mursha seems used to this sort of treatment, and that makes it all the worse.

He sneers at the playful little otters for a moment, then walks her back to me at the end of the line. “Disgusting,” he tells me. “At least beavers spend their time building and producing. Those things were just floating like little freeloaders.”

“They were holding hands!” Mursha chirps.

I ignore Drek’s horrible manners and lean down to speak to his daughter. “Did you know otters hold paws so they don’t float away from each other during their naps?”

“Woah. They sleep in the water?” she asks.

“Yep! In fact, they spend most of their time in the water. And when they have to walk on land, they like to slide around on their bellies!”

Mursha giggles at the thought. Even with Drek’s downer attitude, I know I can make this a good time for her.

The next exhibit is the penguins. Thankfully, there’s no line at this one. It’s big enough that everyone can linger by the window and watch. I pick Mursha up so she can squish her face against the plexiglass.

“Penguins can’t fly. I learned that from my storybook,” Mursha informs me.

“That’s right, they’re flightless birds. They also mate for life. Do you know what that means?” I ask.

Mursha thinks for a moment. “Nope.”

“It means they have only one mating partner for their entire lifespan.” Drek answers. I can appreciate the literal and technically correct answer, but it’s not exactly packaged in a kid-friendly context.

“It means two penguins will choose each other to have babies with and stay together forever,” I say.

“That’s what I said,” Drek grumbles from the corner of his mouth.

“Oh! Like people. Well, sometimes,” Mursha says.

Drek looks slightly uncomfortable at her blatant and honest observation, but Mursha doesn't seem to notice or care. Instead, she begins giggling and pointing at a small group of penguins who look to be holding their own conversation.

“Do you think they're talking about us?” I ask. “What do you think they're saying?”

“They don't have that level of intelligence,” Drek retorts. “They're simply loud. Shoo! Go away!” he yells. Again, embarrassment takes me as he attempts to force a group of birds to waddle away like annoying waitstaff.

I lead our strange little group over to the ocean exhibit. In this large space, there's one main tank with a whole bunch of colorful saltwater fish. There are also a few smaller tanks throughout with reef fish, eels, starfish, and sea urchins. The ocean exhibit leads to a glass tunnel with a moving walkway. From the entrance, I can already see the sharks drifting above it.

So does Mursha. The poor kid grips Drek's pant legs and cringes.

“I don't wanna go in there!” she cries, pointing at the tunnel.

“Okay.” Drek leans down and picks her up, letting her hold onto him for dear life. “Let's look at these fish over here instead.”

I sigh in relief. I was not looking forward to Drek forcing a terrified child into that situation. But I am concerned that the dolphin tank is on the other side. So I step away for a moment to check the map and plot an alternate route to the dolphins. When I return, I see Mursha still in Drek's arms but looking much happier.

“That's a silly clownfish!” Mursha points excitedly.

“Correct. But he's anything but silly. Clownfish are very territorial and protect their anemone homes like fierce warriors. The anemone stings other fish and keeps them away. But the clownfish is immune.”

“Woah,” Mursha replies, obviously only taking in half of what he’s saying. But still, I find myself taken aback by how patiently he explains the different fish to her. He genuinely wants her to learn, not just accept what she’s told.

“And that’s a yellow tang. He has spines in his tail that he can use to slash his opponents.”

“I had no idea sea life was so violent,” I say, standing next to them again.

“Why do fish have to fight?” Mursha asks. She sounds slightly sad at the thought.

“Nature is fierce and requires that all within it are prepared to fight for their right to live. We are lucky. Our battles are fought here,” he says, poking Mursha on the forehead. “You must be smart to succeed and thrash your enemies.”

At that moment, a lightbulb goes off in my head. Something about Drek finally clicks in place. His protectiveness over Mursha’s education and routine doesn’t come from stubbornness or arrogance. He’s trying to prepare her for a world he finds harsh and challenging.

He’s doing this out of love.

Slowly, my frozen opinion of the orc begins to thaw. As we walk around the different exhibits, Drek calmly and gently informs Mursha about the different animals we see. She’s enthralled, snuggled up on his side like it’s all one big educational movie.

It’s a lot for a kid to take in. And soon enough, she’s nodding off against Drek’s shoulder.

“Awe. We still have so much to see,” I say, pointing at the map.

“I’ll let her sleep for now,” Drek whispers. “This must be a lot for her.”

Even now, I’m taken aback by his thoughtfulness for her. This tenderness is so unlike the orc I’ve been getting to know. But I’m glad I’m finally able to see this side of him.

“Did you want to see the sharks? She’ll probably sleep well through the tunnel.”

“Oh. Yeah, I’d like that.” I smile warmly at Drek, who quickly turns away from my gaze. Of all things, I certainly wasn’t expecting him to ask what I’d like to do today. It’s a welcome development.

But what strikes me the most is how obvious it is that our goals are completely aligned. We both want what’s best for Mursha. We simply have very different ways of going about that. I have a feeling it’ll be much easier to find a solid common ground for us to work together on this.

We stand on the moving walkway, taking in the black tip reef and nurse sharks. Both are generally harmless, even when you’re in the water with them. I hope one day, Mursha will be brave enough to come here and learn that herself.

Not everything is as scary as it appears at first glance.

DREK

“Oh, oh, here’s the part I was talking about. Right here,” Abby says to Mursha, currently curled up at her side as we watch the latest remake of a childhood classic. “It’s almost exactly like the original but better.”

I scoff a little louder than I mean to and receive an eye roll from Abby for my faux pas. This is a sticking point for us both. The new nanny with the outlandish, but admittedly beneficial, approach to childcare doesn’t seem to mind that this perfectly good film has been remade *for no reason at all*.

“Don’t say it,” she warns me with a mock glare. “I’m warning you.”

“Daddy, now you have to say it,” Mursha pipes in, sitting up expectantly. “Miss Abby is teasing. I know it.”

Abby and I both chuckle at the little orc’s request. She’s extremely observant for a kid her age but even more so now that Abby’s been around. Eight weeks has never gone by so fast for me, despite the colorful messes and boisterous games I come home to on the regular.

No matter how hard I try to get the new nanny to see the difference between an outdoor and indoor game, she insists a little paint and a lot of high-pitched squeals never hurt anyone. In or outside. As if that’s the logic behind my point.

“All I’m saying is –”

“Exactly what you said earlier in the car and at the dinner table,” Abby interrupts me, though her comment is directed at Mursha.

“If kids these days want to watch the story of a young teen trapped in an alien man’s body on an alien planet, they can watch the original. It’s just a waste of money to redo something that still works.” I kick my slippers off, then think twice about the example I’m setting for Mursha.

I get up from my side of the sectional and place my slippers neatly by the door. It’s still weird to be wearing them in front of the help at all when I think about it, which is exactly why I don’t. Mursha’s been insistent that I spend more time with her, which I know won’t be the case forever. I should take advantage of her affections now before she hits her teen years.

“Still works for who? Look at this CGI. I can barely tell the evil emperor is behind a green screen.”

“The point of having an imagination is to use it, right, Mursha?” It’s not beneath me to get my two cents in using a child, my child. Abby will know when and if she ever has kids of her own. What parents do, they do *for* their offspring, not *to* them.

“Right!” she hollers, getting up to grab another handful of popcorn from the massive bowl on the table.

“You’re using my words against me, not fair,” Abby teases, and not for the first time. Spending so much time with her and Mursha, at least when I’m not working, has made me a master at getting under the new nanny’s skin. If playfully, of course. “I said that in reference to toys. Who needs a real sword when they can make one out of a wrapping paper tube?”

“Or toilet paper rolls glued together,” Mursha adds through a full mouth.

“Mursha, finish your bite first,” I advise, my tone level like Abby’s been suggesting lately. I have to admit, it’s working like a charm.

“Sorry, Daddy,” Mursha says with her mouth still full. I press my lips together to stifle a smile. *Okay, maybe it doesn’t work like a charm, but it still works.*

“Progress, not perfection,” I say, just as Abby says the same thing. I wince, knowing I’ve once again used one of her sayings.

“Jinx! You owe me a coke!” She snaps her fingers and points at me.

“You know where the fridge is,” I reply, shooting Mursha a wink.

“You’re being silly, Daddy,” she observes with a smile, and I nod.

It’s hard not to be when Abby is around. She’s a walking ball of energy who fits into Mursha’s life seamlessly, and by default, she fits into mine, too. And in the strangest places.

I’ve never been one to make breakfast every day, but slowing down to cook with my little one has been surprisingly rewarding. And delicious. The cinnamon swirl pancakes from the other morning may have been my favorite batch thus far, especially since it pairs well with Abby’s morning coffee — Columbian roast with heavy whipping cream and maple syrup-infused honey.

Rustic but creamy, what started out as a polite sip turned into a full cup, then another, until Abby’s regular now becomes mine. Who knew the three of us would work so well together?

“I’m being silly?” I point to myself, feigning insult. “What about you? How many kids do you know sleep in a dinosaur costume?”

When Mursha saw the green and yellow pajama set, complete with pockets and fake horns, she enlisted Abby’s help to get it. I wasn’t exactly happy to see Mursha in the ensemble the first night I peeked into her room, but the outfit has grown on me. Especially since it inspires Mursha to get ready for bed. Abby laid out strict guidelines for wearing the

costume, which included brushing one's teeth and turning off the light when asked.

"Not a lot," she answers. "Which is really sad. I bet all the kids in the world would sleep better if they had a uniform."

I smile, remembering Mursha refers to her flamboyant sleeping attire as a uniform. "What about the kids who are scared of dinosaurs?"

Mursha's face drops, and she studies the popcorn bowl as if the answer to my playful question is somewhere buried in the buttery smorgasbord.

"A perfect opportunity to sleep a mile in their shoes," Abby points out, and it's my turn to roll my eyes at her.

Though I'm new to this kind of employer-employee dynamic, it feels right to smooth out some of my edges where I can. It's for Mursha, after all, and I want Abby to stick around to give her some normalcy and structure. That won't happen if I don't go with the flow, as Abby seems to think I can do more often.

"Dinosaurs don't wear shoes!" we all say, and I find myself outnumbered.

"Jinx!" they both yell, and I throw my hands up.

"Fine, Cokes for you both."

"What?" Abby says, pointing to her chest and looking wounded by my words. "I jinxed you twice, that means I get two."

"That sounds fair, Daddy," Mursha chimes in. "I counted two jinks, too." She holds up two fingers, and I pretend to bite them off.

"Raaa!" Mursha says, glowering at me while doing her best dinosaur roar. She flips the hood of her costume, or uniform, or whatever it is, and bolts behind the couch.

"Little Mursha, get back here," I say, and Abby pokes me on the shoulder.

“You mean the beast?” Abby cocks an eyebrow as a high-pitched giggle escapes Mursha’s lips. Abby motions for me to go along with her.

She leans in and whispers something about this being her alter-ego. “A beastly dinosaur with a pension for tickling its victims,” she finishes loudly, and I do my best to sound horrified.

“Not a... beast...” I squeeze my fists and fight the strong desire to bolt up and tell Mursha to stop switching up her play. We’re supposed to be watching a movie, not attacking the breadwinner of our two-person family.

Three-person lately, though, right? All I can do is frown at the thought. Sure, Abby’s become a staple but an addition to the family unit? I don’t know about that.

“Oh, no...” I finish and can admit it sounds lame right away. My jaw clenches as I study the screen. What did Abby say about using the elements around you while engaging in play? “Or maybe an alien.” I try to make my voice low and fearful. “You saw those blue eyes, right? And the green skin? Out of this world...”

Another phantom giggle tells me my suggestion is acceptable. Abby bites her lower lip as she stares my way, a smile spreading across her face.

“I know exactly what you mean,” Abby whispers. “Did you hear that?”

Another giggle, followed by a gentle tapping on the wall. With the lights off, the only break in the darkness permeates from the TV screen, casting shadows along the wall I think the scratches are coming from.

What little shadow is my daughter? I wonder with pride. Mursha’s hunting skills are phenomenal and something our ancient orc ancestors would be proud to witness.

“We’re no match for an alien orc,” Abby says, pointing to the dinosaur-shaped shadow directly behind Abby’s side of the sectional. “Our only hope is to get her hoodie off.” She creeps

onto the couch, and I see her shadow reaching down to catch hold of the alien beast that is my six-year-old.

“Ah!” Mursha’s up in a flash, no doubt having seen Abby’s slow-moving silhouette coming for her hood.

“She’s too fast! Watch your armpits!” Abby hollers, and I crack a smile. A tickling alien? Really?

Mursha leaps over the couch and toward me, tickling my underarms mercilessly. I feign injury and squirm around, letting Abby come to my rescue.

“Got you!” Abby hollers as she pulls off Mursha’s hoodie. “You’re tickling days are over.”

I scoop the prisoner up and let Abby follow me to Mursha’s room. After a small debate on which book she’d like to have read to her, we settle on a story about a duck and a beaver. The fact that I don’t complain during the whole reading hits me once Abby leaves for the night.

She really is unique... is the last thought I remember as I drift off to sleep. *And unique looks good on her.*

ABBY

“That one! You should try on that one!” Mursha says, pointing excitedly at a sparkly pink dress. It’s something I’d never wear in public, but with how excited Mursha is, I know I’m going to at least try it on for her sake.

“Alright then,” I say. “We’ll add it to the pile.”

“Good idea,” Drek chimes in, still seated and watching Mursha peruse the racks.

To my utter surprise, Drek asked me to attend a charity ball with him and Mursha the other day. I’ve never gone to anything so formal before, and considering how rich Drek is, I rightly imagined it will be a really fancy one.

So of course, I have nothing to wear. I doubt my sundresses or the cute date-night dress I bought three years ago will be up to standard. And when Drek asked to tag along on a shopping expedition to correct this deficiency, I couldn’t really say no.

I still have mixed feelings about this. He’s gotten better about not being quite so uptight, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t still have his moments. So far at least, he is behaving. Albeit a little grumpily, but he hasn’t made any eye-rolling-worthy comments yet.

For the past few hours, Mursha and I have been compiling quite the stack for me to try on. I grab the pink dress off the rack and hand it to Drek, now standing next to me.

As I pass off the dress to him, I have to suppress a giggle. He looks so out of place here. Especially with him standing in front of a rack of colorful dresses.

“Don’t you think we’ve collected enough dresses?” Drek says in a way that implies he strongly believes we have.

For a moment, I think of pretending to be oblivious and pick out a few more obnoxious dresses for him to hold. But I decide to take pity on him instead.

“You’re probably right. Let’s head to the changing rooms, and we’ll review our haul.”

“Like a fashion show?” Mursha asks, her eyes lighting up.

I grin. “Yep! Just like a fashion show.”

We make it to the dressing rooms, and I take the pile of clothes from Drek with me into a room. I begin to sort out the pile, separating dresses I actually might consider from the silly ones Mursha picked out.

Though not all her choices are silly. In fact, some of them are downright gorgeous. The girl is going to have great taste when she gets older.

I decide to start with one of the silly dresses, a poofy purple thing with garish rhinestones. Making sure to be extra dramatic, I twirl out into the viewing area and strut around. Mursha practically bounces in her chair while Drek looks a bit concerned.

By the end of my performance, Mursha is clapping and Drek is slumping in his chair muttering something about ‘wasting precious hours on frivolous female nonsense.’

I doubt he means it though. He was the one who decided to come, after all. And even if he does complain, he still carried the dresses around for us, so I’ll let it go.

For the next half hour, I model dresses for the two of them. As I show off more dresses, Mursha begins pointing out which ones she thinks are better than others. Thankfully, most of the ones at the top of her list are also at the top of mine.

Then we're down to the last dress. I saved it for last since I thought it was the best out of all of them. It's also one Mursha had picked out.

It is a beautiful royal blue that brings out my eyes and accentuates my curves. It is classy and sexy all at once.

Looking in the mirror, I feel a surge of confidence. When I emerge from my dressing room, Mursha gasps and squeals enthusiastically. Even Drek sits up in his chair. There's a flash of something in his eyes, but it's gone before I can analyze it.

"This one is the best one!" Mursha declares.

I laugh. "I agree. You did an excellent job with this one."

The girl beams with pride. "I want to be a model next!"

"Well, what are you waiting for then?" I take her by the hands over to the mirrors. "Come on, we'll be models together!"

We begin doing goofy modeling poses in the mirror. Mursha pretends she has a ballgown on and sways around in her imaginary dress.

In the mirror, I catch a reflection of Drek chuckling at his daughter's antics behind us. Our eyes meet, and I grin at him. Try as he might, he's never quite as irate as he pretends to be. Especially when it comes to Mursha.

Having been effectively caught almost enjoying himself, Drek averts his gaze from mine in the mirror and clears his throat.

"Good. Now that you have your dress, we can check out and leave," Drek says, back to his usual annoyed self.

I click my tongue and turn back to him. "Now come on, Drek. That is the wrong type of attitude to have here," I say playfully.

He raises an eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"Yes, it is," I say in a mock-serious tone. "Maybe you just need to feel pretty, too."

I pluck a sparkly hat from a nearby rack and place it on top of his head. Mursha bursts out laughing, and I try not to join her. “There, now you’re pretty, too. How does it feel?”

He gives me a deadpan look which normally might have some effect but not with that sparkly hat.

“I feel stupid,” he mutters.

“Wrong answer!” And with that, I drag him out of his chair and over to the hat rack. “Choose a different hat.”

He gives me a bewildered look, and I can tell he’s about to open his mouth to protest. Luckily, Mursha joins in. “Yeah, Daddy. You have to try more hats until you feel pretty, too.”

Not wasting a moment, I snatch the hat off his head and then take another from the rack. “How about this one?”

Realizing he’s effectively been trapped, Drek submits to his fate and begins trying on hats. Mursha and I both make critiques about each one and try to find him the perfect hat.

At one particularly silly one, Mursha nearly doubles over with laughter. Drek raises an eyebrow and I can almost swear the faintest smile crosses his lips. “Oh, you think this looks silly? Why don’t we put it on you and see what you look like?”

He takes off the hat and puts it on Mursha. It’s way too big for her, of course, and covers part of her face. It only makes her laugh harder. She twirls around with it, proclaiming that she’s the prettiest orc girl in the land.

When she comes to a stop, the hat is lopsided and her hair is all over her face. Drek gently brushes her hair back and that faint smile comes across his face again.

My heart flutters at the soft, adoring look he gives her. Then my brain catches up with me and the tips of my ears burn.

Surely I’m not thinking of him in *that* way. I immediately deny the thought.

This is just me being happy that his good dad side is coming out.

But my eyes feel glued to him, and my heart has yet to settle down. He's attractive, there's no denying that. But this feels like something more than just appreciating how immaculately he's built.

I shove the thoughts away. *No, this was just a one-off thought based on him doing something sweet. Nothing else.*

We go to check out. Drek pays for the dress, claiming that he isn't going to make me buy something for an event he asked me to. I end up being immensely grateful for it when I see the price. Apparently whoever made the dress *knew* it was a really nice dress.

A few days later, we attend the charity event. Mursha is wearing the frilliest, puffiest ensemble I've ever seen, while Drek rocks a really nice suit.

I try very hard not to ogle the man, and my heart beats a little faster in my chest in the process.

You're just having a regular reaction to seeing someone attractive. Nothing else, I tell myself.

The event is held in a completely decked-out event center, with absolutely everyone dressed to the nines. For a moment, I feel like I'm going to be so out of place here. But to my surprise, I fit right in. I even get a few heads turning, which boosts my confidence by a thousand percent.

Drek, on the other hand, is a nervous wreck. Not about the gala but about Mursha.

"We need to keep a watchful eye on her at all times," he mutters to me. "She's bound to wander off or stain her dress with the food. I'd rather not have her ruin that dress."

It's about the eighth time he's expressed those same concerns with me. His eyes have barely left his daughter, and he looks about as taut as a bow.

I'm not sure what compels me to do it. Maybe it's that my confidence is so high right now. Or maybe it's that we've developed some sort of tenuous bond in the time we've spent together. Perhaps it's the way my heart keeps thundering in my chest every time he looks at me. I have no idea.

But whatever the reason, I gently take his hand in mine. He looks taken aback, and I almost drop his hand. But I decide not to back down and instead give it a little reassuring squeeze. “It’s going to be alright. And besides, she adores that dress. She’s not going to let anything happen to it.”

Slowly, his gaze softens and he nods acceptingly. And even more surprisingly, he doesn’t pull away.

My heart begins to beat more wildly and barely fight back a blush.

This isn’t mere attraction. This isn’t a one-off thought or fleeting feeling. No, this is something deeper.

And I have no idea what to do about it.

DREK

“**A**nd besides, she adores the dress. She’s not going to let anything happen to it,” she says, her soft hand squeezing my own calloused digits. I’m too stunned to squeeze back. Do I want to squeeze back?

“Right,” I manage, willing myself to say more. “You’re right.” I realize I’m holding my breath, and so I clear my throat in an effort to gain composure. “That’s... a good point.”

“I have another one,” she says, and I wonder if she’s having a hard time looking up at me. Her heels give her a few inches, but there’s still plenty of space between us.

Why am I thinking about the space between us right now?

Instead of answering my own thoughts, I study her moving lips while inadvertently licking my own.

“Don’t you think?” she finishes, pulling me along after Mursha, who’s currently swaying back and forth to the music overhead.

“That’s not a dance floor,” I offer, then gesture over to my young orc. “She’s going to spill someone’s drink.”

“Only if they get too close,” Abby replies, tugging on my arm to keep me from going after Mursha. “It’s a party. Everyone’s dancing a little.”

“It’s a charity ball,” I correct. “People talk. It’s a whole pissing contest with the elites.”

“Then let them piss all over the place,” she says, then laughs as two passing waiters stare at her nonplussed. She throws her head back. “What do you think they’ll say if they catch you chastising her for getting her six-year-old groove on, huh?” She cocks a perfectly plucked brow at me, and my mouth goes dry.

For a split second, I forget where I am and what we’re talking about. How can she be so childish and mature at the same time? Have her looks always been so penetrating?

“Fair enough,” I finally manage, then grab the first drink off the nearest tray I see. I take a sip and flinch, realizing I should have also snatched one for Abby.

“You nervous?” She’s squeezing my hand, so I squeeze back. “Or just thirsty?”

“I can’t be both?” I ask, not even sure what I mean by this. She giggles again and gestures over to Mursha, currently flailing her arms around like two windmills.

“Should we show her how it’s done?” she wonders aloud, and it takes a few seconds for me to realize she’s teasing. “Fine, fine, I’ll stop. We can just cheer for her on the sidelines.”

She pulls me along some more, and I let her. I gesture for a waiter with my drink hand and he follows us to offer Abby a flute of something sparkling.

“Danka so much,” Abby says to the waiter. He smirks and points a pale finger at her.

“Oh, I see what you did there.” He walks off with a smile on his face, and I wonder if I’ve ever gotten such a genuine look from a caterer.

She really does have a way about her... She catches me staring down at her while she sips her drink, and I raise my own because I don’t know what else to do.

“Cheers,” I offer, then go to clink her glass with my own.

She pulls hers back and looks up at me curiously. “What are we toasting to?”

I look around the room for an answer. The vibrant tapestries, over-the-top centerpieces, and elaborate ice sculptures give me no inspiration. I shrug and frown down at her. Maybe if she thinks her question is weird, she'll let it go.

“Does it matter?”

She brings her hand to her chest, pretending to clutch a set of invisible pearls. “It always matters. That’s etiquette, sir.” She takes a sip of her drink and then throws an arm up in mock exasperation. “At least, I think. Manners and rules are your thing, not mine.”

I realize I’m squeezing her hand again. I fight the urge to lean in and kiss her when she suddenly squeezes back. “Are you admitting you don’t know?” she asks after a second.

“Know what?” I feel my furrowed brow and relax my facial muscles when she grins wide.

“What to toast to,” she says through a collection of giggles. I don’t know if I’ve ever heard a sexier sound.

“Um...” I look around once more and see my daughter, still swaying and bobbing to the music as guests and caterers maneuver around her. “Mursha? A toast to Mursha.”

She gives me an even look and then lifts her glass. I wonder if I’m blushing but resist the need to feel my cheeks. What am I, a teenage princess?

“To Mursha, then,” she offers and clinks her glass to mine before I can reply. She takes a sip and then spins on her heel, no doubt on her way to Mursha. She lets go of my hand to do so, and I shove it into my pocket rather than reach out for her again.

“You done getting your groove on, Miss Thing?” Abby asks, a gorgeous and perfect hand on her curvy hip.

Mursha shakes her head and spins around again and again. I step forward to tell her to be careful but stop short when a gruff voice breaks my concentration.

“And that’s why you don’t bring your kids to special events.”

A cold chill starting from the base of my neck runs down my spine, and before I know it, I'm inches from the speaker's face, his pockmarked, pale-green complexion going ashen as my eyes narrow into slits.

"What did you say to me?" I manage through gritted teeth.

"I didn't say anything to you." The orc blinks back his surprise and squares his shoulders, puffing up his chest as if he's some kind of competition to me.

"Your name's Viceroy, right?" I ask, knowing full well who the businessman is. Though my work is in marketing and his business is real estate, Viceroy and I run in some of the same circles.

"So what if it is? My friend and I are having a conversation here." He motions to his human companion, a blond man who looks as taken aback as Viceroy should at my icy tone.

"About little kids?"

"Someone's gotta tell the youth when they're no good at something," he retorts. "Did you get her the frilliest dress in all of modern memory so she won't break anything when she falls?"

I step forward but keep my hands off him for now. When I swing the first punch, I don't want him to see it coming. It spoils the surprise, at least for me. I'm hovering over him, his broad shoulders not so stiff now that we're so close.

"Speaking of breaking something, you talk like you –"

"Do I have to come over here and pull you away again?" I ignore Abby's firm grip on my arm until she squeezes tighter. I let her fix my tie while I stare daggers at Viceroy, whose friend is currently whispering in his ear for them to walk away.

"We're in the middle of something, George," Viceroy says, not taking his eyes off me.

"Actually, you're not." Abby's voice is all business. "I'd say, right now, all you're in the middle of is a rock and a hard

place. Your friend here knows it, I know it, even the waiter trying to get your attention behind you knows it.”

Viceroy frowns and slowly turns around to grab another proffered drink. I wonder if the waiter saw our quarreling and rushed over before things got physical.

“It’s why you’re going to accept the drink he’s offering you, while I spare you the pain of becoming part of tonight’s feast.” She gestures to the buffet table without taking her eyes off Viceroy. “Which I’m sure will end up in the papers.” She motions to several guests with press badges, some sporting cameras around their necks.

Viceroy glares at Abby but takes the drink, disappearing among the crowd along with his terrified companion. I grit my teeth, realizing Abby’s level head just saved me from a world of backlash.

What am I doing not noticing the press? The other guests? My own daughter? I look to Mursha, still several feet away from us and cluelessly shimmying along with the music, much to a few guests’ delight. I watch as a silver-haired woman claps her hands along with the rhythm, encouraging Mursha to keep dancing.

“See, not everyone’s so uptight,” Abby offers, motioning to my daughter, currently curtsying to the beaming guest.

“Well, aren’t you a party all on your own?” I hear her ask in a thick southern drawl.

“Uh-huh! I’m a party!” Mursha claps her hands along with the music as best she can, receiving help from a few more guests who join in. Soon, the silver-haired woman is helping Mursha with her spins, giving my little girl pointers I never knew existed.

“You two must be very proud parents,” a bubbly voice says to my right. I look down to see a mustachioed man whose name escapes me.

“She’s the best,” I reply, before realizing who the comment included. *This guy thinks the two of us are a couple.*

“Oh, we’re not... I’m just...” I stifle a smile at Abby’s hesitancy. Is that a hint of red I see blossoming on her cheeks? She grabs her dress and looks over at the man, almost apologetic. “I’m the nanny.”

“Oh, really?” The man says, looking between us as if he’s in on some secret we’re keeping. “Is that what they’re calling it these days?”

I blink a few times as the music drowns out whatever words are fumbling out of Abby’s mouth. Sure, I’m attracted to her and appreciate everything she does, but she works for me. Doesn’t that mean she’s off-limits?

ABBY

“**S**pending time with you is my favorite,” Mursha says while spreading purple paint all over a piece of paper. The legal-size canvas is already smeared with pink, blue, and red fingerprints.

I’m not sure if she’s trying to paint something tangible with her fingers, but she’s certainly having fun. She’s already spent most of the day in a classroom, and I know the first week of school is always a hard adjustment, so I just want her to relax with her arts and crafts, whatever that looks like.

“Oh, I’m sure that’s not completely true. You like spending time with your father, right?” I ask. I would hate to intrude on that bond between father and child. I want to be a good role model and influence on Mursha’s life. Just not at the expense of her bond with her actual parent.

But Mursha shakes her head, and my heart sinks. “Nope. I love Daddy. He’s the best Daddy! But he isn’t fun like you.”

This gives me pause. Mursha is placing fun as her top priority in social situations. Which makes sense. She’s six years old! What six-year-old would prioritize education and discipline over no-strings-attached, old-fashioned fun?

But that’s troubling for Mursha’s emotional development. She’s beginning to associate time with her dad with boredom. Or worse. If something doesn’t change soon in these formative years, there may be an irreparable rift in their relationship.

Better to prevent it than try to fix it later.

While Mursha works on her masterpiece, I get to work planning something special. A father-daughter day out is just what's needed. Of course, I'll be there to supervise from a distance. But the emphasis needs to be on Drek and Mursha having fun together, and hopefully bonding.

Drek is hesitant about the idea because of course, he is. It involves taking an entire day away from work, including turning off his work *and* personal phone. Even though I remind him Saturday isn't technically a work day, anyway, and promise him I'll take lots of cute pics with my own phone, we both know that's not the point.

Still, I emphasize how important this is for his and Mursha's relationship. That seems to do the trick. Drek relents and agrees to take off this Friday for this special day.

When it arrives, we start off early. Breakfast is item number one on the agenda. I wanted to take Mursha to this family-friendly place that serves ice cream for breakfast. But Drek starts things off terribly by refusing.

"You only get one," I state firmly. "If you choose to cross out ice cream for breakfast, then you have to commit to every single other thing on the list."

Drek looks down at me as if he's still confused by the fact I refuse to back off for him.

"Let me see the list again," he mutters. I take the folded paper from my pocket and hand it over to him. He glances down the list, brow furrowing in frustration, then hands it back to me. "Yes, I choose this item. However, I'll concede and try to make it fun. For Mursha's sake."

Drek's idea of a fun concession is to make breakfast himself. Mursha seems a little bummed that her special day is already being dragged down by her dad. Exactly what we were both worried about.

"It's probably something gross like oatmeal. Or vegetables," she mutters forlornly. I give her a comforting pat on the shoulder and try to think of something to say to cheer her back up.

“Breakfast is ready. Exactly on time, too.” Drek walks into the dining room while balancing three plates on his arms. He puts Mursha’s down first, and her eyes light up with glee.

It’s a pancake happy face. I’m genuinely shocked at the display. There are fried egg eyes, a bacon smile, and even whipped cream for hair. I look up at Drek with a smile to let him know he did well. But Drek avoids my eyes and simply sits to eat his own breakfast.

“Don’t dawdle,” he warns us. “We have a strict itinerary to follow.”

I shake my head. It’s not strict at all, but I suppose that’s just what he’s used to. We finish breakfast and head out to our first activity, the arcade. Every kid loves the space of loud noise, silly music, and bright flashing lights. Most dads like it, too. This one, however, does not.

“A frivolous waste of pocket change,” he grumbles as Mursha gawks and gasps at the games on display.

“Good thing you have more than enough to go around,” I mutter in response.

Drek scowls, but sticks a very large bill in the change machine regardless. Quarters spill out, and Mursha grabs as many as her tiny hands can hold before beelining to the whack-a-mole machine.

“What is this?” Drek asks. Mursha places two quarters in the machine and grabs the oversized hammer. The machine whirs to life as an annoying little tune blares loudly and big orange lights blink on.

“You gotta whack the moles!” Mursha says to him. She points at the second player’s hammer urgently. “Come on, it’s gonna start.”

One mechanical mole in a straw hat and denim overalls pops up out of a hole. Mursha moves to whack it, but she’s too slow and the creature descends back with a tinny giggle.

“Awe,” Mursha whines.

“Hm. I see.” Drek hunches over and takes a warrior’s stance. I can’t help but laugh at the sight. This huge, hulking orc is holding a children’s toy like a battle ax, preparing for war with a game. Another mole pops up, and Drek annihilates it. I’m genuinely terrified he might break the machine.

“Yes!” Mursha yells. The fact that this is competitive and not cooperative seems to go over her head. She seems pleased just to hear the moles scream out in pain.

Two pop up this time, and Mursha rushes to hit one as Drek gets the other. This continues for another minute, the two of them working together to put these plastic rodents in their place while I record the moment on my phone.

When the game ends, a heap of tickets spit out of the dispenser. Mursha explains to her dad that they’re used in exchange for prizes. Drek huffs at the prize display, commenting that he could buy the entire arcade itself if he wished. But he lets Mursha hoard the tickets anyway.

I watch as Drek opens up more and more. Each game acts as an opportunity for the two of them to compete on Mursha’s level. He may be bigger, older, and smarter, but Mursha knows how to play these games. He takes each defeat with grace and only gloats a little when he wins.

What matters is the time they spend playing together. Well, that and the giant stuffed rabbit Mursha turns the tickets in for. She holds it close and squeals.

“Is it lunchtime? I’m hungry,” she states.

Drek looks at his watch, and I can already hear him saying lunch isn’t on the agenda for another fifteen minutes. So I interrupt to keep the good vibes going.

“Yep! And we’re going somewhere really special!”

Mursha’s eyes widen with delight as I lead the group to a nearby pizza chain. My parents used to take me here on special occasions. I have so many good memories and hope the charm will spark something for this family just as much.

“Look at all the funny toppings!” Mursha squeals while jabbing her finger at the menu pictures. While this place does

have the standard fare and even a few fancy options, there are also some fanciful choices geared toward kids.

“We’re not having any of those,” Drek says flatly. That spark of joy leaves Mursha’s eyes. “Prosciutto, cremini mushrooms, caramelized onions, and the heirloom marinara sauce will suffice. What?” He looks at me, somehow surprised that I’m disapproving of his order.

I simply gesture my gaze to Mursha, who is sulking next to me.

“Come on,” Drek mutters in exhaustion. “At least let me order a sufficiently nutritious lunch.”

“What’s not nutritious about peanut butter candy on marshmallow fluff sauce?” I ask innocently. “Every day she eats a nutritious meal. Let her have this one. Come on.”

Drek makes a long, uncomfortable series of expressions. Most look painful. But finally, he relents. “You can order your own personal pizza with whatever you want.”

Mursha’s face lights back up with a wide smile. I agree to the compromise and guide her through ordering a peanut butter and jelly bean special with extra mini marshmallows. She eats the whole thing with unending giggles, despite complaining how awful it tastes.

Drek smiles warmly at her.

“What’s next?” he asks as we get back in the car. There’s less suspicion in his voice now.

“Now, we have a soccer game,” I state, gesturing at Mursha’s soccer bag in the back seat.

“Oh, yeah!” Mursha says. “It’s Saturday!”

“It’s Saturday,” I repeat.

Drek seems to relax as if he thinks he’s off the hook for this activity. But I have something special in mind for today’s practice.

Once the kids have changed and assembled, I announce the good news.

“Today, we’re going to warm up before the game with a special kind of drilling activity!” I say. The kids look excited to change their normal practice routine. “This is Mr. Orgun, or Mursha’s dad. And he’s going to play the big, mean giant. And you all will be the little elves! To win, you have to kick your magic, uh... spheres! Kick your magical spheres into your dens.” I gesture towards the goalpost. “And not let the giant grab you!”

“I did not agree to this,” Drek whispers angrily.

“You didn’t have to. Ready, everyone?” I ask. The kids cheer as I release the entire bag of soccer balls onto the field. It’s a mess of kids rushing around, kicking balls awkwardly, and falling in the grass. Gravity is a cruel mistress for kids playing pee wee soccer, I have learned.

Drek is reluctant to play along at first, but once he loses a standoff with Mursha, he starts getting into it.

“I’m gonna get ya!” he yells in a playful, evil giant voice as he chases the kids around the field. He pulls Mursha up into his arms as she squeals, the other kids coming to her rescue.

It’s funny, cute, and most of all, sweet. That serious, tough persona he’s crafted is pulling apart at the seams right in front of me.

I smile and wonder how much harder I can keep pulling this thread loose.

DREK

I've had long days before. Grueling days in the office. Never-ending meetings on business trips. But rarely have I had a long day where I came back feeling lighter and happier.

When Abby had suggested the father-daughter outing, I'd been more than a little hesitant. Mursha and I have our own routine, our own way of doing things. But ever since Abby came into our lives, she's pushed us to change our dynamic, to connect in a different way than we had been.

And until today, I still hadn't really grasped just how much we needed it.

Mursha is half asleep when we get home from the game and the movie afterward, and Abby and I have to work together to help get her cleaned up and tucked into bed. Before she can fully go to sleep, though, Mursha reaches up for me. Without hesitation, I lean down and squeeze her in a hug.

"This was the best day ever, Daddy," she whispers. "I love you."

My heart squeezes inside my chest. I pull away, meaning to tell her that I love her, too. But when I look down, she's already fast asleep. I whisper the words anyway, wondering if she'll hear them in her dreams somehow.

Abby and I quietly walk out of her room and down the hall. As we walk, I try to remember how many times my father told me he loved me. I grimace when I realize I can't remember if he ever told me he loved me.

Beside me, Abby cocks her head. “You okay? You seem a little down. Well, more than usual.”

I hesitate only for a moment. “I was thinking of my father.”

She blinks in surprise. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you mention your father.”

I grunt. “I’m not surprised.”

Especially since, when I think of my father, long, silent dinners and cold, disappointed stares are what come to mind.

“I was just realizing that I don’t think my father ever told me he loved me,” I continue. “And for some reason, instead of feeling surprised, I just feel nothing.”

Because that’s who my father was.

I look back at Abby. The shock is visible on her face. She shakes her head. “I’m so sorry about that. That’s not what a father is supposed to be.”

Her firm statement takes me back a little. She’s so certain in the way that she says it, and a strange feeling of injustice rises up within me. I wish someone had said that when I was a child.

I push down the feeling and look ahead again. “No need. It’s in the past now.”

“A lot of times, our past comes back in ways we don’t always see,” she says quietly.

“Perhaps,” I admit. “It’s not often I think of him, and when I do, it’s never good.”

The clock chimes loudly, reminding us how late it is. I sigh. “I suppose I ought to let you go to bed, though.”

A soft smile graces her lips. “You know, I was just thinking that I could really go for a cup of coffee. Would you like me to make you one, too?”

I recognize the invitation. The willingness to talk with me. I nod, and we change course for the kitchen.

Five minutes later, we sit next to one another on the couch with hot cups of coffee in our hands. For a while, we sit in silence. Abby waits patiently without expectation.

I try to sort out my thoughts to decide where to begin. Finally, I decide to start broadly.

“My father was a business orc like myself,” I begin, my voice low and flat. “He commanded a great deal of respect in the community and was very successful. Arlo knew how to spot the value and importance of anything he came across, and apparently, he found my value... lacking.”

Abby doesn't speak, just waits for me to continue. And so I do. “He always seemed to resent the fact that he had a child he had to raise. Or at least house. I suppose maybe that's why I focus so much on Mursha, her schedule, her nannies. You know, so that she knows I tried, at least. So she doesn't look back and feel like an inconvenience.”

Abby frowns. “I'm sorry you felt that way. Unfortunately, there's no test to become a parent, you know? It's a hard job, I'm sure. One not everyone is equipped for, and by the time you realize that, you already have the kid. Ready or not.”

“Well, kids never understand that. They don't see it as selfish parenting. Kids will try to please everyone till they're blue in the face, whether those people even deserve the effort.”

“Did you?” she asks.

I shrug, trying to look indifferent. “I guess I did. All kids do. Who doesn't want to make their father happy? I set aside everything about myself that seemed childish or immature. I studied business and finance just like he did. I worked harder than anyone else my age and strove to mimic him in every way I could.”

“Did that change anything?” she probes.

I laugh a little, but it sounds forced and bitter. “Well, I guess it was harder to ignore me as an employee than as a son.”

“So you never really got past that, huh?”

“No. Even with his dying breath, he was more worried about his company and his own legacy than anything to do with me. He may have left me the company, but it was never out of love or even appreciation. I was simply the best person to carry out his legacy, and it was the custom.”

I don't share with Abby how after he had died, the bitterness had started to set in. I was struck by the unfairness of it all. All the work and dedication I'd put into for him, only to be rewarded with coldness. With my father dead, there was nothing that could ever change that.

I would never get his approval. The chance had passed, and I had failed. It had felt like one final insult from my father, never to be undone or resolved.

I do share something else, something maybe even more important. In fact, I know it's more important because it's about my daughter. She's worth more of my energy, time, and concern than my father ever was.

“I admit, I see shades of my father in the way I treat Mursha sometimes. I expect so much of her, and sometimes I can see it. The way she struggles, the way she wants to make me happy. I never want her to feel anything other than my concern for her well-being, but it's hard to show that to a six-year-old. Do you think she'll understand someday?”

You do this for her, not to her. He did it to you. You just happened to always be in the firing range, and it wasn't your fault.

There's a sadness in Abby's eyes, and I don't know how to interpret it. I suddenly fear she's about to agree with my father or agree with my own worst fears. Anger burns hot in my chest, and I can't decide if it's to him or myself.

“I fear that I'm only repeating the cycle with Mursha. That's why she'll grow up resenting me her whole life. And that she'll be right in doing so.”

Slowly, she slides closer to me, taking her time before speaking. “I'll admit, there are times when you do shut her down a bit too quickly.”

Her words cut like a knife.

“But,” she continues. “I don’t doubt for one second how much you love her. When she really needs you, you’re there.”

She gives me a reassuring smile. “And the fact that you are aware of your shortcomings and want to improve means that you do truly care. You can make your relationship stronger. You’re not like your father.”

I didn’t know how much I needed to hear the words until they were out. I didn’t realize how much I needed to hear them from *her*. Relief washes over me like a tidal wave, and I suddenly feel like a burden has been taken from me.

“How can I do better?” I ask her quietly.

She scooches a little closer, and I welcome her closeness. “Well, you can start by listening to Mursha and appreciating who *she* is as a person. You said that you were always trying to mold yourself like your father. It was the only way you thought he’d accept you. But you know now that that was wrong.”

“You’re right,” I realize, a little bit horrified at the thought. “I don’t want her to think that she has to have perfect manners, or excel at the piano, or be the cleanest, neatest child, in order to have value. Is that what I’m telling her?”

“I think you can have expectations, without making the same mistake with Mursha by trying to make her something she’s not. Just make sure to love the person Mursha already is and accept her that way. Let her be a kid, let her make mistakes, and support her when she needs it.”

Abby gently put her hand on top of mine. “And you don’t have to do this alone. I’ll be here to support you too whenever you need it.”

Her words both encourage and sting. I really had come so close to becoming the orc my father was. I could have wound up repeating his mistakes and hurting my dear sweet Mursha the same way I’d been hurt.

But now I have a course of action in front of me. I will be better than my father before me. And with Abby’s help, I

know I can succeed.

Abby.

She always exudes such warmth and laughter. Every time she speaks, it's as if the sun is shining brightly upon me. Until recently, I'd considered it more of an annoyance than anything. But now I see what a beautiful gift she possesses.

She supports me on an emotional level like no one before. And I couldn't be more grateful.

Her hand is still on top of mine. Slowly, I grasp it and caress her hand.

"Thank you," I murmur. And I know somehow that I've just taken a step that could alter the course of our simple dynamic forever.

ABBY

Drek's hand on mine feels strangely soft. It's the last word I would use to describe him. But at this moment, that's all I can think. His eyes, his voice, his touch, everything about him is just soft.

I feel like something has changed in him. Something deep and profound. Our conversation must have unlocked far more than his childhood trauma, or the need to better understand his daughter. What is it? What's this hanging in the air that feels so completely new?

"The house is so quiet," I murmur with a nervous giggle. Drek doesn't answer, stroking his meaty thumb over the back of my hand. I bite my lip and resist the urge to giggle again.

Something has shifted inside of me as well, I can feel it. The invisible barrier placed between us for the sake of professionalism has cracked and shattered. A sense of intimacy now sits there. It's calming and warm and, oh yes, soft.

I don't know if we've made a big mistake. Maybe we're about to make an even larger one. But at this moment, I can't find my senses enough to care.

Drek's hand leaves mine and travels up to my face. He strokes my cheek while his eyes search mine. What is he looking for? The answer to an unasked question? Permission? I lean my face into his large hand to give it to him.

There's the quick hiss of a hitched inhale. Drek's fingertips run through my hair and massage my scalp. His other hand

rests on my knee. I realize my hands have been sitting still in my lap and let them move up to take him by the wrist. I turn my head and give Drek a small kiss on his palm.

“Abby,” he whispers.

“We have to be quiet,” I say. Drek nods, and with that, we are both on the same page.

This is happening.

Drek leans over me and takes my mouth in his. The kiss is gentle at first, still. We simply sit there with our lips pressed together. It reminds me of my very first kiss in middle school. The two of us were so shy, completely unaware of whether this was what we were supposed to be doing.

But unlike that first kiss, this one slowly becomes more comfortable. I open my mouth at the first sign of pressure from Drek’s tongue and let him in fully. I inhale a long, deep breath through my nose as Drek begins claiming my mouth as his.

He leans me down onto the couch until I’m lying on my back. Drek straddles me as best as he can here, with one foot on the floor. His hand cups the back of my head and raises my lips back to his. I simply throw my arms around his neck and let him guide this moment.

This is not how I would have ever pictured this day progressing. But now that we’re here, I can’t see it any other way. Drek kisses me, runs his lips across my cheeks and jawline, then plants small kisses down my throat. My body is aching, screaming for more.

I know Drek’s is, too. I can feel his erection through his pants, rubbing against my hip. I run my fingers through Drek’s hair as my hips buckle into him. He continues even lower, placing his hands on my thighs and lifting the hem of my sundress until my panties are exposed.

I’ve never been more relieved by my choice of cute undergarments for the day. It’s almost like something in the back of my mind simply knew.

But before I can continue on congratulating myself, I feel a warm, wet pressure descend on me. I let out a gasp as Drek runs his lips over my panties, teasing my folds underneath.

“I want to taste you,” he mutters into the flesh of my thigh. My hips buckle again into him as I try to quietly murmur my agreement.

I close my eyes and stifle a moan as I feel one large finger pull my panties to the side. Then Drek’s tongue slides across my pussy. I slap my hands over my mouth and swallow my pleasure as the orc licks me over and over. He lifts my legs off the couch and hooks them over his shoulder so he can get a better angle.

And oh, I’m so glad he did. Drek presses his tongue against my clit, and I start to feel like I’m losing it. My hands remain firmly planted on my mouth while I watch him delight in making me squirm. He knows exactly when to lick, suck, and even gently nibble to keep my body shaking and quivering under his spell.

“Drek,” I whisper, my voice strangled. “I’m... I’m so close.”

He simply moans against me, the vibrations of his voice adding to the pleasure. Drek pulls away for one moment just to give me a command.

“Then come for me.”

I do. God, I do! I bit my lip and grip the cushion under me as wave after wave of my orgasm rips through my body. It’s been so long, I feel like a dam that just needed to burst.

When the aftershocks wane and I’m able to relax again, Drek lifts me back up and kisses me on the neck.

“Ready for more?” he whispers in my ear. The sound of his voice sends a shiver down my spine. I’m ready for anything he has in mind for me.

“Yes,” I reply. “Yes, please, yes. I want your cock!”

I can feel Drek grin against my neck. He positions me how he wants, with my front against the back of the couch and my

ass on full display for him. Drek slides my panties down to my knees and slips a finger inside of me.

“Still soaking wet,” he says quietly. “You’re ready for me.”

“Yes,” I moan. I hear a zipper pull down and the rustling of clothing. Then I can feel hot, hard flesh press against my pussy. I bite my lip again and smile as Drek slowly pushes his cock into me.

I gasp and throw my hands over my mouth again. Drek removes them with his own hands and tilts my head back. He leans over me and presses his mouth over mine. Then his hips begin to rock.

Back and forth, so slowly. So painfully, achingly slow. His large hands grip my hips, pushing me hard against the couch. He keeps my back arched as he drives into me again and again.

“Drek,” I groan into his mouth. “Please, faster.”

He moans his agreement and does so. His cock slams into me, fast and hard. One hand moves up to the straps of my sundress, pulling them down my shoulders and releasing my breasts. Drek takes one in his grasp and massages it, squeezing and teasing my nipple.

The sensations from his hand on my breast and his cock driving into me are so good, it’s making me dizzy. I grip the couch with one hand and the back of Drek’s neck with the other. The pressure is building up again. I can feel an orgasm coming right on the horizon.

“I’m so close,” I whisper into Drek’s mouth.

“Again?” he asks, sounding very pleased with himself. “Good.” Drek’s hand releases my breast and slides down to my pussy. His fingers find my clit and start rubbing small, quick circles over it.

That does it. I come on Drek’s cock, quivering and trembling as pleasure wipes my mind blank. All I can feel is Drek touching, rubbing, kissing, and fucking me. I haven’t felt this good in so, so long. Even as my orgasm winds down, all I want is to stay right here and let him use me over and over.

“Oh, Abby,” he groans. “One more time for me.”

I feel ready to laugh at the thought, but he shows himself to be dead serious. Drek does not let up. He’s completely determined to make me come a third time.

How did I end up in the lap of such a generous orc?

Drek works me over, rubbing my tits and my clit in time with his thrusts until I’m bursting at the seams once again.

“Yes, yes, Drek, please!” My mouth opens in a silent scream as my third orgasm grips me. The pleasure washes over me and holds me so tightly that I almost miss when Drek’s groans begin to pick up. Then he lets out one strangled moan as his thrusting comes to an end.

My muscles are still tensing and relaxing as he slides out of me. I don’t think I’ve ever been so thoroughly sated in my life.

Drek places a soft kiss on my forehead and strokes the back of my neck. “Good?” he asks.

I reply with an exhausted and satisfied sound before relaxing against him.

He chuckles in response. “Let’s get cleaned up. You can stay in my bed tonight.”

There are implications behind that offer, and the images that race through my mind are threatening to heat things back up. But for now, a hot shower sounds delightful.

Drek carries me to his master bathroom where he gets the water exactly right. It’s hot and steamy, and the pressure from the tap feels perfect on my achy back muscles. Drek lathers me up, paying special attention to my hips and thighs. The soap smells like orange peel and bergamot. It’s relaxing and sensual.

When we’re finished, we dry off in the plushest cotton towels. Drek offers to find me something to sleep in while I finish drying my hair. When I step into his bedroom, he hands me a T-shirt with the name of some corporate retreat team building company’s logo on the front.

He shrugs his shoulders. “Never wore it. It felt soft, though.”

It does. I slip it on and crawl into Drek’s bed next to him. I lay my head on his chest as if this were routine and natural. It already feels that way. I fall asleep to the sound of his gentle snoring and dream of an even better day tomorrow.

DREK

I wake up, as usual, at five in the morning. But unlike every other day, I feel bone tired and willing to allow myself to continue my sleep a little longer. I only spend a few moments wondering where this sudden urge has come from when I roll over and remember.

Abby.

Last night was such an incredible experience. Not just because of the sex that has left me feeling peaceful and sated for the first time in a very long time, but for the conversation we shared as well.

Thinking back at her words, I'm resolved to begin a new relationship with Mursha today. I will follow Abby's advice and let my daughter be herself, rather than the orc I expect her to become. I will not raise a carbon copy of myself. I want to raise a smart, strong, and capable young woman who is wholly her own. In order to do that, I need to start learning who this little girl really is.

That starts today.

I get out of bed quietly so Abby can continue sleeping if she wishes. Mursha is most likely already awake, so I dress and walk out to greet her.

"Good morning, pumpkin," I say as I open her bedroom door. Mursha is sitting in her bed, wide awake and playing with two stuffed animals.

“Morning, Daddy!” she cries back. Mursha carefully places her toys back on their appropriate shelf before rushing to give me a hug. “You’re not dressed for work.”

Indeed, I’m wearing more casual clothing today. I’m in no rush to get to the office. There isn’t much for me to do right now, anyway. I’d just be coming in for the appearance of productivity. And really, what’s the point of that, especially on a Sunday when no one is there to see it?

“I thought I’d spend some time with you this morning,” I say as I scoop Mursha up.

Her eyes sparkle with delight. “Yay!” she yells. “What are we gonna do?”

I frown as we walk down the hallway. “That is an appropriate question. What do you enjoy doing, Mursha?” It pains me to admit I don’t know the answer to that question. But I *will* learn now.

“Oh. Um... I like art time.”

Art! Good, that’s something we can find common ground with.

“That’s wonderful. Do you prefer the study of painting or sculpture? I have a guilty fondness for the old impressionists of the nineteenth century, though the true display of skill and mastery of craft can be found with the realism movement of the Renaissance period.”

Mursha looks up at me and blinks. Then she holds up her hands. “I like to finger paint with Miss Abby.”

“Hm. Pointillism, then.”

Mursha nods, despite her eyes saying she has no idea what that means. “I also like cartoons. Oh! Pretty Kitty Pals is starting soon, can we watch it together? Please?”

I frown. I have never enjoyed children’s animation. It has never struck me as containing anything of genuine substance. But I suppose that is the point of this little exercise. I need to detach myself from my own expectations and meet Mursha at

her level. Even if that means numbing my mind with bright colors and horrid sounds.

I turn on the television and let Mursha change the channel to the appropriate station. We're greeted with terribly bright neon-colored felines singing a quick-paced tune in high-pitched, metallic-sounding voices.

It is grating on every level imaginable. Every instinct in my body is screaming to confiscate the remote and change it to the news. I could check my stocks or the current state of politics. Even just the weather report would be preferable to this nonsense.

But Mursha looks so happy. She's bouncing in her seat and clapping her hands to the music. How could I take this away from her? So I let the strange program continue on.

"These anthropomorphic cats seem to get themselves into easily avoidable conflicts that could be fixed with a simple conversation. Yet they refuse!" I exclaim as the blue cat bemoans his lost ball of yarn that he forgot he lent to the green cat.

Mursha shushes me for the third time.

"That's the point."

I startle at the sound of Abby's voice from behind me. She leans over the couch with a gentle and knowing smile on her face. It makes my heart melt.

"The cats are acting like children, Drek. The point is for kids to see themselves in the characters so they can learn how to resolve their interpersonal conflicts in a safe and productive way."

Mursha nods in agreement as if she understood any of that.

"I suppose that makes sense." I sigh. "I just wish it weren't so... obnoxious."

"*You're* being obnoxious," Abby whispers with a laugh.

We finish the short morality tale before moving on to breakfast.

“All done!” Mursha exclaims as she drops her spoon into her oatmeal bowl. “Do you still wanna play?” she asks hopefully.

Abby gives me an expectant look. I simply nod.

“Yay! Are you staying to play, too, Miss Abby?”

Abby shakes her head. “I’m sorry, Mursha. I have some errands I need to take care of. But I’m sure you and your dad will have a great time today.” She gives Mursha a quick kiss on the top of her head and excuses herself, leaving me and the little one alone.

Mursha leads me back to her room for a game she calls Cat Cafe. She makes me sit at a small, plastic table and surrounds me with her stuffed animals.

“So, you’re the customer, and I’m the owner. And you want to drink coffee with all these cats!” she states firmly.

“I... wait. My motivation is to drink coffee with small animals?” I ask, bewildered.

“Yeah! It’s a cat cafe! Okay, are you ready to start?”

“Wouldn’t a cat cafe serve coffee to cats?” I ask.

Mursha’s eyes go wide. “That’s genius, Dad!” she cries. She opens her closet door and digs through a box labeled *Costume* until she finds what she’s looking for – a headband with white, fluffy cat ears. And she expects me to wear them.

“Okay, you’re a cat and a customer, and you’re here to drink coffee and pet other cats.”

I frown again. “So the central premise has not changed?”

“Order a coffee!”

“Okay, okay, ahem. I would like one black coffee, please.”

Mursha looks at me with deep disappointment. “Dad, you gotta order something fun.”

“I don’t... fine, one black coffee with two sugars.”

“... Okay then, that will be one gigundonormous iced coffee with pumpkin sprinkles and extra cherry syrup. Would

you care to try one of our fine local pastries?" Mursha asks while she pretends to write on an invisible memo pad.

My instinct is to say no, I don't need the extra sugar or carbohydrates. Especially if my waitress insists on giving me a day's worth of sugar in one beverage. But this is pretend, I remind myself. And indulging Mursha is more important than aligning with my old ways.

"I would like one chocolate croissant, please."

"Yes, mister! Right away!" Mursha turns around and runs into the closet, then returns with two mounds of plastic building blocks stuck together. "One cherry pumpkin delight and a strawberry croissant."

"I ordered a chocolate croissant," I retort.

"No, you didn't. So, are you enjoying our wide selection of kitties?" she asks.

I look through the sea of stuffed animals and pick out the only one that looks like a cat.

"Yes, this one is very... cat-shaped."

"No, Dad! That's one of the waitresses!" Mursha screams. I carefully hand the cat over to Mursha, who places it on her bed. "You're late for your shift, Miss Carolyn. No tips for you today."

I feel a slight pang of sadness for Carolyn that I cannot explain. She isn't even a real person! Yet my empathy extends to her plight regardless.

"Here," Mursha says while handing me a dragon toy. "This kitty is named Sunshine, and he's orange and needs a new home."

I accept the green dragon and attempt to pretend it's actually an orange cat. "Isn't this his home?"

"Noooo, you have to pet and snuggle all the cats, and then be sad that you can't adopt all of them and then pick one to take home."

The rules of this Cat Cafe game are so strange and bizarre to me. If everyone took home a cat, wouldn't the cafe run out of cats to display? Then it would just be a regular cafe. I suppose this is a business model only dreamed up by a small child. I tamp down my urge to write a new business model for this imaginary cafe and decide to simply play along.

“Sunshine is a fine cat. Very soft, but his fur also gets everywhere.” I even pretend to sneeze for emphasis.

Mursha looks delighted that I'm finally starting to get it.

“What about Whiskers?” she asks, handing me a stuffed seahorse.

I hold the plush toy close and make a disgusted face. “What are you feeding these things? This one smells like fish!” I exclaim. Mursha doubles over in laughter. I can't remember the last time I've seen her this happy.

All it took was a slight shift in perspective. How did it take me so long to realize this? I will never forget what Abby has done for me here.

“Okay, you simply must pet Mrs. Fruzzles. Here.” Mursha rummages through the 'cats' and picks out a pink bear. I set it in my lap and pet it like a real feline.

“Hm, yes. I think this one will do quite nicely.” Then I pick up my building block coffee and take a pretend sip. Mursha claps her hands.

“That was perfect, Dad!” she squeals. Somehow, I feel like I'm back in school getting top grades on a difficult test. Except I'm much happier about this review.

“Now let's play Super Dress Up Doggy Princess Party!”

I choke down a sigh and nod with a smile. “Anything for you, Mursha.”

ABBY

“Do you think it’s too much?” I ask Mursha, knowing full well she’ll say what she’s been saying for the last thirty minutes.

“It’s perfect! I give it a ten!” She holds up both her hands and wiggles her fingers.

I notice Mursha keeps darting her eyes between my earrings, which match but not in the normal way. I finger the glittery half-moon dangling from my right ear lobe and the shooting star hanging from my left.

“Do you like them? Would you want a pair of your own?” I suck a breath in through my teeth as I realize my second question probably should have been directed at Drek first.

“Yeah! Yeah!” she squeals, hopping up and down on the bathroom rug. “And a blue dress like yours.”

“Sky blue,” I specify and point a finger to the ceiling.

“I like that.” She points to the bangles on my wrist, which complement both the earrings and dress perfectly. I got lucky when I found this dress, which fits like a glove and seems to be made for the sparkling pieces in my jewelry box.

“Oh, your wrist would look good with some of these.”

I let her run a tiny finger across the collection of thin bracelets, each slightly different in texture and shape, though designed with one another in mind. At least I think so. It’s what the woman at the swamp meet said when I bought them off her.

“Can I put on makeup?” Mursha inquires in a whisper. “I want to pretend I’m getting ready.”

“Then you’ll need this,” I say, handing her a blush brush and then motioning for her to swipe it across her face. She just wants to pretend anyway, and whatever rouge is still left on the brush won’t hurt her. Or alert Drek of our secret. “And this.”

She takes my near-empty tube of light peach lipstick. I tell her to dab at her lips, and she does so like a natural.

“Very pretty.” I tap a finger on her nose and then start to pick up. I know what’s coming next, and I don’t want to explain why half of Mursha’s dark locks are curled.

“Read me a bedtime story?” she asks as Drek enters. We decided it would be best to get ready for dinner at his place, especially since the babysitter Drek hired won’t arrive until minutes before our reservation. I have an inkling it’s his secretary, rushing over after a long day in the office.

“Which story?” he asks as she runs out, no doubt heading off to her room to pick out a favorite. “You look...” He purses his lips and studies the sun-shaped barrette in my hair. “All dolled up and ready to eat.”

“Thank you,” I say in my most chipper tone. I don’t think his ‘dolled up’ remark was the first thought he had, but I don’t want to put a damper on things over a little gut feeling. Tonight is supposed to be a good time, not a tense one. “Right back at you.”

“I’ve owned this suit for years,” he tells me. “It’s very comfortable.” I don’t know why he’s informing me of the fact, but Drek doesn’t ramble, so it must be for some reason or another.

“I just got this,” I explain, motioning to my off-the-shoulder, sky-blue dress, which hugs my curves but falls nearly to my ankles in mismatched cuts, giving the piece a boho feel. “And your daughter wants one just like it.”

He blinks more than once, and I wonder if he’s having to hide his surprise, or disappointment, or whatever it is he feels

about my statement.

“It’s really unique,” I continue. “She’ll be the only six-year-old I know with something this cute.”

“Where would she wear it though?” His literal question hits me like a ton of bricks, and I suddenly feel my cheeks getting hot. I’m more than grateful for the blush I’m wearing, which surely masks my discomfort.

“I don’t know,” I admit with a laugh. “A tea party?”

“Mursha doesn’t dress up for tea parties.”

“Yeah because she doesn’t have this dress,” I point out, hoping he’ll take note of my perky tone. “Just think of the possibilities.” I wave my hands about for effect as my bangles clink together.

“Did she mention the...” He points to my bangles. “Those?”

“Actually –”

“Daddy! Where are you?” Mursha calls from her nursery.

“Duty calls,” I say as he leaves the room. He frowns at me slightly. “Just say you don’t get the reference! You don’t have to scowl at me,” I holler through two cupped hands.

“Inside voice,” he calls back, and I roll my eyes. How did I know he was going to say that?

The restaurant is fancier than I expected. I don’t know if I’ve even seen a place that valet parks for their diners except for in the movies, let alone eaten at one myself.

“How did you hear about this place?” I ask as soon as the waiter, rocking a crisp and immaculate cloth napkin over his bent arm, struts away as stiffly as possible.

“It’s a friend of mine’s,” he replies, not taking his eyes off the menu. “I like to eat here at least twice a season.”

“Must have to plan way ahead,” I offer, taking note of the four glass walls around us. We’re in the middle of the restaurant, though we’re cut off from the rest of the place but for a single archway, secluded yet on display.

“No,” he says casually, finally meeting my gaze.

“Oh...” I look around the verdant terrarium that is our private area and point to one of the ferns hanging from the ceiling. “I don’t envy the guy who has to get up there and water that.”

“Afraid of heights?” he asks, just as our waiter comes back in with a bottle of champagne Drek insisted I’d love.

“This particular drink pairs well –”

“The lady and I have already decided.”

“Very good, sir,” the waiter replies as I catch myself looking for the man’s name tag. Do waiters even wear name tags in a place like this?

I’m in the middle of trying to wrap my brain around a French word that rhymes with mayonnaise as I read over the options when I realize Drek’s grabbing my menu.

“Trust me, you’ll love it,” he offers, explaining that fondue bourguignonne is a must at this place. And when it comes, I have to admit Drek is right. The three different melted cheeses, various breads, and veggies that come with the beef are divine.

“Wow,” I say through a full mouth, dropping my fondue stick or whatever it’s called on the table. “I’m filling up on the appetizer and loving it.” A fleck of cheese-covered bread shoots out of my mouth and onto the crystal decanter of cucumber water.

I laugh and roll my eyes at my poor manners, then reach to wipe away the food.

“Your napkin,” he says quickly before my hand can touch the crystal.

“Sorry.” I do as he suggests but apparently not to his satisfaction.

“We’ll take a new decanter of water, Tobias. And the lady needs another napkin.” He then points to my empty champagne flute as Tobias grabs the sullied decanter from the table.

“Oh, no. I can wait for the meal,” I offer with a smile, noticing how busy it is out on the main floor. “My napkin is just fine.”

Tobias fills my glass from the champagne bottle chilling in its own bucket on a table nearby. I fight the urge to tell him I can pour my drink myself since I’ve picked up on the fact this is a place that thrives on pampering its clientele.

“Fine isn’t good,” Drek explains as Tobias nods and exits. I almost hold my breath to see how long it takes the waiter to return, which I guess will take no more than ten seconds. “Is there something wrong with your chair?” he asks, and it takes me a moment to realize he’s referring to my elbows on the table.

I pull them off immediately and stiffen as Tobias re-enters the private dining area.

“Thanks, Tobias,” I say as the chef brings out our dishes.

“Salmon en papillote,” she says jovially, her French accent light but present. “The vegetables from our private garden, of course.”

The steaming salmon, which took Drek all of fifteen seconds to decide upon, hits my nostrils, sending me straight to heaven.

“Drek, am I drooling?” I say playfully, the chef winking in my direction while fawning over the compliment. “Check and see if I’m drooling.” I lean over, and Tobias pretends to check my face.

“Not yet, ma’am,” he replies with a twinkle in his greenish-brown eyes. “Enjoy your meals.” I wave as he and the chef exit.

“The fish is cooked in paper,” Drek explains, keeping his eyes on his plate. He clears his throat, and I get the distinct impression that I’ve embarrassed him. “Ensuring the moisture stays exactly where it should.” He spoons a little bit of brown liquid from a ramekin next to him, then sprinkles it across my fish. “But it’s only perfect with this.”

“I’m in,” I say, grabbing the spoon from him. Drek pulls it back.

“You only need a little, just like this.” He taps the side of his spoon onto my plate as I swallow hard. Does he know how he’s coming across?

“If it’s so perfect for it, why didn’t the chef put it in the recipe, huh?” I’m gripping the arms of my chair and have to remind myself to relax my fingers.

“Because an ounce of this would double the cost of the plate,” he says matter of factly. “Just one more reason to work harder than the average Joe. The best things in life aren’t free. And this here –”

“Stop.” I take it for the brag it so obviously is and accuse him of flaunting his wealth and knowledge.

“I’m not trying to,” he grumbles, and after an awkward moment, I get up and storm out. I know he’s not going to follow, given the scene that would make. “Where are you going?”

I wonder once I’m out of the restaurant and down the block whether I still have a job. But at the same time, I don’t care right now. I’d be happy if I never see the guy again.

DREK

I press my lips together and drum both hands on the table. How dare Abby storm out like that! Is she the nanny or the one who needs nannying? *Maybe even a swift slap on the ass for good measure.*

I don't know whether I'm more angry or embarrassed, even though Little Miss Ditch is the one in the wrong.

"She should be embarrassed," I say to myself as soon as the valet walks off.

I grip the steering wheel of my Maserati and wait for a chance to peel out. I almost dare a cop to pull me over. I'm looking for a fight.

Pull yourself together! The thought screams at me from the back of my mind, and I don't need to wonder whose voice it is. Father was never subtle and neither are the memories of him.

As I park crooked in my own enormous garage, there's no part of me annoyed at my shit job. I can't worry about lining up the sleek black whip with all my other sports cars, not now at least. It smells like oil as I step out and grind my teeth, catching a glimpse of a fresh stain in the middle of the workshop area where my mechanic keeps his tools.

"Fucking A, Barry!" I holler into the phone as I step into the foyer. "You know the rules of the workshop. You know that oil stains, God damn it." I lick my lips and continue, despite the tiny voice in the back of my mind telling me it's enough.

The voice reminds me of Abby, and the last thing I want to do right now is listen to that woman. That *rude* woman. I shimmy out of my jacket for one of the new housekeepers to take, I think her name is Stephanie.

“Grab whatever supplies you need to clean it up. Good night.” I hang up, satisfied with the voicemail until I catch a glimpse of Stephanie’s sopping wet hands.

“I was doing the dishes,” she explains as I scowl at her hands, red and soapy from scrubbing pots, no doubt.

“And you stopped to run over here and wreck my suit?” I snap, snatching it back to hang up myself. I ignore the fact that I basically shoved it upon her as soon as I entered.

“My apologies,” she says weakly as I hang up my dinner jacket and stick it in the nearest closet.

I wave her explanation off. It’s neither where I keep my jacket nor what I meant to do, but I’d rather confront Abby than backtrack with the maid now. This is my house, and if anyone is going to put something where it doesn’t belong, it’s me.

“No need,” I snap. “The best apologies aren’t said, they are shown.” I spin around and head upstairs, only slightly embarrassed by my behavior.

I grip the banister and wonder whether I should reach out to Abby or not. I might regret letting her get away with treating me like an unwanted date to prom, rather than the king I was in high school.

And still am... I nod at my own thought as I text her.

What? Did you forget how to say goodbye? I send it as a tiny tug on my shirt sleeve tells me Mursha’s still up.

“Where’s Abby?” she asks innocently. It takes everything in me not to roll my eyes as I scoop her up. Of course, that’s the first thing Mursha would say. Not ‘Hi’ or ‘Welcome home. You’ve been missed.’ No. It’s ‘Where’s Abby?’ Typical.

“Now get some rest, little one,” I say as I tuck her in. Mursha didn’t fight me when I carried her to her nursery. But

now that she seems aware I won't be reading her a story, Mursha begins to pout.

"Where's Abby? Abby would read me something!" she sniffles, and I clench my jaw before responding.

"She's busy, dear. And Daddy is, too. I read you a story before we left, anyway." At the expression on her face, I relent. "Double story time tomorrow, yeah? Anything you want," I add, checking my phone for any reply.

"Promise?" Mursha's voice is soft and less whiny now.

"Promise," I tell her before backing out of the room.

I pace for the next thirty minutes waiting for a response, making sure to let the babysitter know that she's still on the clock. And when I get none, I take advantage of the sitter's presence and take it upon myself to seek a response out.

"What's with walking out back there?" I growl as soon as she opens the door to her place. The ride here wasn't very long, ignoring all the red lights the way that I did.

"What's with the banging at..." She keeps her front door cracked and looks behind her, no doubt to a clock on the wall or something. "Ten-thirty at night."

"Don't act like you were sleeping."

"Don't act like you own the place," she snaps, and it's the first moment I realize how angry she is.

What an *ingrate* this woman can be! How hadn't I noticed this? I dare her to find another man or monster who could treat her to the same things I can. I think the idea's a good one, so I say it.

"You act as if someone like me comes around every day," I growl and lean against the door, making myself nice and comfortable.

Her mouth literally drops open. I smirk and stand tall, knowing I've made my point.

"Right back at ya," she states, going to shut the door like this meeting is over. Who does she think she is? I'd never let a

door slam in my face, even if by her. Maybe especially by her.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. We’re not done here.” She rolls her eyes as I chew the insides of my cheeks. I taste blood and run my tongue along the cut.

“We look done to me.” Her voice is pure ice, and for a moment, I’m actually surprised by the goosebumps crawling up my neck. That’s it. She needs to remember who’s in charge here.

I smirk and back up, letting her know I don’t care what she does tomorrow. So long as she doesn’t ruin my schedule.

“I need to know if you’re watching Mursha tomorrow or not. If I need someone else to get her to school in the morning, I need to know now. Some of us like to keep our obligations. Unless they like getting fired, I guess.” I’m impressed by my calm tone. She can be as cold as she wants. It’s not going to stop me from being professional. And this is nothing if not a professional relationship first.

“Fine.” She shrugs. “Do it, then.” She shuts the door, and I hear the click of the lock, then another. And another.

“Unbelievable,” I mutter but only once I’ve turned around and walked off.

No way I’m giving her the satisfaction of seeing a response – of any kind. She’s probably still looking through the peephole. I keep my fists from clenching until I’m in the car. What did she think I was going to do? Break down the door?

I open my phone and navigate to my secretary. Before I can finish the text message telling her to find me another sitter for tomorrow, a knock on my window breaks my attention. I roll it down to face an angry Abby.

“You’re a bully. You think everything you do is great, and it makes even a great dinner with you shitty.”

I keep my face still, which doesn’t take much, honestly. It’s not like I haven’t heard this tired argument before. Thirty years I’ve been alive, and it still amazes me how often less

driven individuals confuse genuine confidence with some form of arrogance.

But I don't have time to explain this to her. I have a daughter to get home to. "I'm assuming this is you answering my previous question. You won't be there for Mursha." I start the car and look through the windshield rather than at her frowning face. "She'll be upset, maybe really upset, but she'll get over it."

Suddenly, half her body is in the car and pulling on my emergency brake. "Hang on, I didn't say that. I'll be there tomorrow. I'm not a mo—" She stops herself, but I know what she was about to say.

"Please, finish your statement." I motion for her to continue, as casually as can be. If she hasn't learned not to touch people's stuff, no amount of indignation is going to do that now. *God, she's a piece of work.*

She swallows hard, the color in her face slowly draining. I have to admit, the sight feels good. She should be embarrassed, the Miss Frizzle remake that she is.

"Look, I just think... I'm here for Mursha, okay? I can watch her. I can do that." She stands up and shrugs, as casual as I was a few moments ago. What is she thinking? Is she just biding her time for a more opportune moment to leave me high and dry?

"See that you do," I finally say, before backing out and rolling up the window. This has nothing to do with getting in the last word and everything to do with getting home to my daughter.

I'm back sooner than I should be, but my lead foot helps me think. Knowing Mursha will be well taken care of tomorrow is all I care about by the time I lay my head on the pillow. It's late. I'm exhausted. But I've made my point.

I don't think Abby will be running out on me again any time soon. Especially since I'm not going to give her the chance to do so. I'm not a fool. But I'm glad to know she doesn't plan to take this fact out on my little one.

Monster or not, there are things I care about. It's the last thing I remember thinking before falling asleep. Mursha and Mursha alone is my primary responsibility. I'm not beholden to immature soccer coaches who can't make up their minds.

ABBY

Showing up again the next day feels a lot like the first day I started here. Except that, instead of feeling like an outsider, I feel like an unwanted stray cat that's going to be chased out with a broom any minute.

Mursha greets me just as bouncy as ever, and I put on my best smile for her sake. My whole cheery façade nearly crumbles, though, when Drek walks into the room. For a moment, the room is dead silent.

I thought I'd know what to say by now. I'd even practiced in the mirror this morning and in the car. To act as though nothing had happened and being near him didn't bother me one bit.

But now, in the moment, all those practiced words fall away. It doesn't help that he isn't saying anything either.

Finally, I nod to him awkwardly. "Good morning." I wince at how tight my voice is.

He mimics me and nods. "Good morning."

Silence again.

"Doesn't Abby look super pretty today?" Mursha pipes up.

I want to dig a hole in the floor and hide there for eternity. It's not her fault that she doesn't know what an uncomfortable question that is for him to have to answer right now. But that still doesn't lessen the tension in the room.

Uneasily, I laugh and turn to the girl. “Mursha, how about you go get your coloring book? That way you can have some pretty pictures for your dad when he comes home from work.”

She pouts a little but does as she’s asked.

Unfortunately, I forgot the little detail where sending her away leaves Drek and I alone together. I stare down at my hands, unsure if I should look at him or not.

He clears his throat. “I should be going to work now.”

I look up at him and flash what I hope is a bright smile. “Right. Have a nice day!”

“I will have a productive day,” he corrects before walking out of the room.

I want to scream. Here I am, trying to say something nice when I definitely didn’t have to, and he can’t even take that! Why does he have to be so infuriating all the time?

In the distance, I hear Mursha’s footsteps coming towards me. I swallow down my anger and put on my I’m-happy-and-everything’s-normal face.

Mursha comes back into the room, coloring books in hand. She looks around and frowns. “Where’s Daddy?”

“He had to go to work. He said to tell you goodbye, but he had to run.”

Or at least that’s what he should have bothered to say. I shove the angry voice into the back of my mind. We are going to be pleasant for Mursha. She doesn’t deserve to be caught in the middle of all this drama.

She lists her head. “Are you mad at Daddy?”

Yes.

“No,” I reassure her gently. “Of course not.”

“Is Daddy mad?”

Probably.

“No. He just had to leave in a rush, that’s all.”

The day goes by fairly regularly after that. We color and read before she has to get ready for her half-day Kindergarten program. After school, we spend a little time at the playground and then head home. I might have even been able to get my mind off of last night's whole affair if not for the weird looks Mursha gives me.

Contrary to what most people believe, children are not stupid. And I know that she more than likely picked up on the fact that something wasn't right. Especially how this morning played out, even with my reassurances.

There are also the comments. After we finished coloring this morning, she'd held up a picture that was clearly meant to be a wedding, saying how she always wanted to be in a wedding.

When we read our book, she innocently said how the mom and dad reminded her of me and her father. The worst was at the park, when she looked up at me with her big blue eyes and admitted something both darling and disturbing.

"I like it best when both you and Daddy come here with me. We feel like a real family."

It had left me completely speechless. Now as we sit at the kitchen table eating a snack, Mursha makes her next comment with a smile. "I think we should all go on another outing again. We all had so much fun together last time."

I bite back a groan. "Your dad seems pretty busy right now. We might have to wait a while."

"I think if we all did something together, everything could go back to normal," Mursha declares confidently.

I frown. "Why do you think everything isn't normal?"

It's Mursha's turn to frown. "Because you're too quiet. And daddy pouts when he's not happy. But don't tell him I said that. He doesn't like it when I say he's pouting."

Clearly, I hadn't been doing as good a job as I thought of keeping up the façade.

“Okay,” I say slowly. “Why do you think doing something together will make things better?”

Mursha shrugs. “One time, I accidentally pushed my friend off the swings too hard, and it made her fall and she cried. I thought she didn’t like me after that, so I didn’t talk to her. But then one day I was trying to build a sandcastle, and she came over and helped. We started being friends again after that, but we had to do something fun to wipe out the bad thing. I think you and Daddy just need to have fun to remember why you like each other.”

I blink down in surprise at the little girl. Six years old and more perceptive than I am. Gently, I rest a hand on her shoulder. “Oh, honey, I still like your dad.”

Sure, I’m still pretty angry with him, but deep down I know it stems from a place of sorrow. After the night we spent together, I really thought this could work. I thought that maybe we weren’t so different after all.

But I was wrong. Devastatingly wrong. But I don’t hate him for it. No, I’m just mad at myself for letting it get this far.

Mursha takes her hand in mine and smiles widely at me. “And Daddy likes you, so you can make each other happy again!”

I furrow my brow. “What?”

Mursha giggles. “You two are always happier when you’re together.”

Then she ducks her head. “I’m happier when you’re here, too. I like it because it feels like you’re my mom, and I think you’d be the best mom ever.”

My heart feels like it wants to shatter. My mouth opens and closes. Words fly to the tip of my tongue, but I’m not sure I should say them. So they just linger there instead.

I want to tell her that anyone would be lucky to be her mother, it just can’t be me. Drek and I only spent one night together, and it fell apart so quickly after that. And as much as I love Mursha, I can’t have a relationship based around her.

And besides, I'm not even sure I should try to fix this. Maybe I *should* just leave now for all our sakes. Drek and I have butted heads since day one, and though we've come to understand each other better, we're still very different people.

And as much as I still care for him, sometimes all the care in the world doesn't mean two people are right for each other.

Not like it matters anyway. I doubt Drek is considering a relationship with me anymore after last night. Clearly, he's looking for someone who isn't me, someone who fits in his world a little better.

Our chances of working out crumbled into pieces when we fought. And those pieces turned to dust when we couldn't even talk things out. All couples fight, but if they can't communicate and apologize, they don't stand a chance in the long run.

Though it pains me to admit it, I know it's over.

I glance at the clock and nearly let out a sigh of relief at the perfect excuse to get out of this conversation. "It's almost time for soccer. Why don't you don't you go put on your uniform, and we'll talk later?"

Mursha, looking a little disappointed, goes without any further prompting. We walk together a few blocks to the practice field, and I keep her busy lugging the big bag of soccer balls so she doesn't ask any more difficult questions. Hopefully, she'll forget about this by the time the game is over.

Soccer is just what I've been needing to keep my mind occupied. Coaching and trying to keep up with the little kids definitely takes up all my attention. That is, until I see Mursha waving at someone in the stands.

I look over to see who she could be waving at, and my breath catches.

It's Drek. He actually showed up. It's not the first game he's attended, of course, but considering the state of things between us, I thought for sure he'd avoid this today. And me.

He's tucked back behind the group, almost like he doesn't want to be seen, but he's here.

I mentally kick myself when my heart starts to race. *He just came to watch his daughter. As it should be.*

But as the kids go back to chasing the ball across the field in a clump, I can't help but sneak a glance at him. To my surprise, he's looking back at me.

Quickly, I turn away. Unable to keep down my curiosity, I glance more subtly at him in my peripheral vision to see if he's still looking at me. Or if the first time was just a coincidence.

But sure enough, he's still looking at me.

At break time, I dare a more obvious look up at him. His eyes meet mine, and there's a look on his face that almost seems... sorry.

Maybe. Or maybe it's my mind desperately conjuring up what I really want to see. Surely he's not sorry about all this. He certainly hasn't done much to indicate it so far.

But maybe he is. Maybe...

I cut that thought off right there. It doesn't matter if he is sorry or not. This whole thing was a mistake and shouldn't have happened. I need to move on.

And yet I can't help the way my heart lurches at the possible what-ifs.

DREK

The car is thick with tension the whole way back to the house. Abby tries to act like nothing is wrong, but it's not hard to pick up on her unease.

As much as I'd like to place the blame solely on her for our disastrous fight, I know I bear some of the blame. I acted out of rage and pain, and now this is the mess we are left with. If perhaps I'd handled things differently, we might have been able to talk it out.

But that's not how it went. I'm not about to fall to my knees begging for forgiveness, and I don't think I'm the only one wrong here. Still, I'd like to make the situation better somehow. To at least patch up the rift between us so we can move past it.

Making a split-second decision, I veer off our course. Noticing the change in direction, Abby sends me a questioning look. When Mursha realizes where we're going, she cheers. "We're getting ice cream! We didn't even win the game! Soccer is great!"

Now Abby is really looking at me like I've grown a second head. I ignore the voice in my head scolding me with reminders that Mursha has school tomorrow and should be going to bed. We go through the drive-through, and I order ice cream for all of us. I even order the double scoop, cookie sprinkles with hot fudge and whipped cream for Mursha even though I seriously disagree with her choice.

Still, Mursha is happy, and the tension coming off Abby seems a bit less now. Perhaps tonight will go a bit smoother now. Even if this isn't meant to be, I'd rather not have things be like this between us forever. We have to be able to find a better resting place for our relationship, whether it's as friends, lovers, or employee-employer in the end, something that can be more than loathing.

Abby is still someone I have a lot of respect for, even if she drives me half mad sometimes.

The rest of the night consists of Mursha filling me in on what she did today while she gets ready for bed. Abby just watches quietly. She's watching *me*, to be more specific. It's frustrating that I cannot place the expression on her face.

Finally, we tuck Mursha into bed, and we are alone.

"Abby," I say, with as much gentleness as I can muster. "I'd like to speak with you for a moment."

With the way she flinches, I quickly realize my most gentle tone is apparently still lacking. My next mistake is when I take us to the place where we talked when we first acted on our feelings for each other. Sitting on the couch for this conversation seemed natural. But sitting here now, it feels more like an unfortunate reminder.

Abby shifts uncomfortably. "So... what is it you wanted to talk about?"

Though her voice is mostly even, there's still a twinge of uncertainty.

I clear my throat. "Actually, it was more about something I wanted to give you."

Her unease morphs into confusion as I pull out my gift for her. I hold out the box, and she hesitantly takes it from me. She opens the box and pulls out the wine bottle inside.

"I believe it was one of the wines you were looking at before I ordered for you. I thought it was only right that you should get to try it," I explain.

Understanding lights her eyes and a thoughtful look crosses her face. She smiles at me, though it's still tight. "Thank you. I'm sure I'll enjoy it."

There's that dreadful silence again. I'd thought there'd be more to say after I gave her the wine. I'd expected *her* to have more to say. I most certainly had not anticipated that I would have to be the one to carry on the conversation.

I clear my throat again. "Abby, last night should have never played out the way it did. And I wish it hadn't gone that way."

I hesitate a bit, unsure how much I should admit. "Spending time with you is never a burden. Nor do I think less of you because of our different backgrounds."

Finally, her expression softens. "I'm glad to hear that. I also wish things played out differently, too."

My mind begins to go into overdrive at those words. Perhaps we really can make this work. Perhaps we can have a second chance and forget about this whole ordeal and move forward. Perhaps –

"But."

That one word brings all my thoughts to a screeching halt.

"But maybe it was for the best that it happened when it did," she says slowly. "Sometimes two people aren't meant to be and they don't find out until further down the line. So maybe it's good that this happened earlier on."

My heart sinks at the words.

She gives me a small smile. "Though that doesn't mean we can't still be friends. Just because we weren't meant to be a couple, it doesn't mean we can't still get along and go on outings with Mursha. And go back to the way things were. I think that worked better for us."

Abby almost sounds like she's trying to convince herself as much as she is me. And as much as I wish we could work things out, I'll let it go if this is really how she feels.

“Of course,” I say with much more confidence than I feel. “We’re adults, we can navigate this. I think that sounds like the best course of action.”

Something like disappointment flashes in her eyes, and I almost wonder if I imagined it. After all, this was her idea. What would she have to be disappointed about?

“Great!” she says cheerily, though the cheeriness doesn’t reach her eyes. “Well, thank you for the wine. I’ll definitely enjoy this.”

“You’re welcome,” I say softly.

Just then, my phone buzzes with an alert. I pull it out to turn it to silent but freeze when I see what it is. It’s an email reminding me about the volunteer work I signed up for. Correction, the volunteer work I signed Abby up for.

I grimace. I’d forgotten all about that. We had been getting along so well when I had signed her up and figured she wouldn’t mind. But now...

I contemplate waiting to tell her until tomorrow, but I know the longer I wait, the angrier she’ll be.

Abby cocks her head. “What is it?”

“Well, I umm, had been meaning to tell you. It sort of slipped my mind, to be honest, and then all *this* happened. But I signed you up to volunteer for Mursha’s fundraiser at her school.” I brace myself for her response.

Abby looks stunned for a moment, then she works her jaw and she glares daggers at me. “I’m sorry, you *volunteered* me?”

“Well, yes. You see, Mrs. Benson always took care of the school stuff before. I’m a very busy orc with a business, and the school requires a certain amount of volunteerism. Her old nanny always fulfilled the obligation in my place,” I try to explain.

“And so you just thought you’d volunteer me without asking?” she asks, the irritation clear in her voice.

I cringe. “It seemed like a good idea at the time. Of course, the timing is a bit inopportune.”

“Oh it doesn’t matter if this little fight of ours had happened or not.” She cuts me off. “You don’t get to just sign people up for stuff without their permission. You don’t own people, and you can’t just throw them around whenever it’s convenient for you! This is why we keep fighting, Dreak!”

She shoves the wine back into the box. “I’m a person, too, believe it or not. My feelings factor into these kinds of things. I might work for you, but if you think you can just use me in whatever way you need, you can forget it.”

I realize then that I’ve just undone everything I tried to accomplish with the gift. And if I don’t do something quick, things will be even worse between us than before.

“I know, I know. You’re right to be angry,” I say quietly. “Of course, you are your own person, and I never meant to undermine that. It was just something I did because it was the routine, but I still should have asked you first.”

She studies me for a moment, the anger and exasperation still in her gaze. Finally, she takes in a slow deep breath, and seems calmer now. At least on the outside.

“Fine, I believe you,” she says, though there’s a warning in her voice. “But you have to promise me to never do something like this again. Got it?”

I nod. “Of course.”

“And you have to promise me one other thing, too.”

I furrow my brow. “What’s that?”

She lifts her chin. “You have to volunteer with me.”

I sputter for a moment. “I can’t. I mean, that’s why I signed you up in the first place. I’m sorry that I didn’t ask, but you also can’t expect me to just drop everything. I have too much to do without also doing a fundraiser. And I certainly can’t just –”

She holds up a hand. “You can and you will. And for the record, this isn’t about me getting back at you or something

for signing me up. No, this is about you stepping up as a father for Mursha.”

I narrow my eyes. “What are you implying?”

She doesn’t back down. “That you get so wrapped up in yourself and your routine that you don’t see how much you’re missing out. She’s not going to be little forever. She’s not going to have school fundraisers like this, and one day, you’ll look back and be sorry it’s gone. The school is asking parents to be involved because *that’s important*. It’s a privilege that you even get to be asked, and you can’t get that through your thick head.”

Abby leans in closer. “Mursha is *your* daughter. Those are my terms. Take it or leave it.”

She’s right, as usual. Mursha will grow up and won’t have fun little fundraiser events to go to. I think of the many hours I spent alone when my father was away at work. How desperately I wished he would just spend a little time with me or take an interest in my life.

Abby waits patiently for my answer. I nod. “You are right. I’ll do it.”

She nods curtly back, obviously still upset with me. And rightly so. “Good. Then it sounds like we’ve got a lot of work to do.”

ABBY

“Okay, now let’s vote on the carnival’s theme,” the head of the PTA announces from her little podium on the assembly room stage. I try not to slink back in my chair in exhaustion. Everyone knows I don’t belong here. Even the janitor looked at me like I was a fish that jumped out of his mop bucket. I am neither a parent nor a teacher. I’m not even really a nanny!

And even if I were, I’d still be out of place here. I don’t know how the last one did it. All around me are overbearing mothers in power suits who refuse to silence their work phones, but brag about never missing a single event in their child’s education.

These are just little kids. Some of them are in pre-school, and even the older ones can’t be more than ten or so. You’d think their kids were filling out their college applications from the way these parents talk.

I blink in realization as I finally consider that some of the kids probably are.

Drek makes a throat-clearing sound, and I glare at him from the corner of my eye. I still cannot believe I was guilted into this mess. Even worse, I can’t believe he gifted me fancy wine in order to butter me up to do it. I bet he thought I’d fall all over him right then and there, ask him to open the bottle, and chug down enough to be more susceptible to the idea.

What an asshole.

“What about, something celebrating autumn? You know, pumpkin patches, hayrides, real Halloween vibes,” a human dad asks. I nod along. It’s a pretty conventional idea, the sort of thing I’ve seen at lots of schools between working as a substitute teacher and student teaching to get my degree. The others, though, murmur quiet words of dissent.

“Oh, wow. How original. I’m sure the public school down the street has never once done anything like that,” a mom in the front row says. She does nothing to hide her disdain for the idea.

I shrink down a little lower in my seat. But Drek lets out a chuckle. He seems to like her sarcasm.

“Well, alright. What’s your idea then, Ragna?” the dad asks. He crosses his arms and scowls.

Ragna stands and looks at us peons in the audience. She puts her hands on her pencil skirt-covered hips and smirks. “A summer in Paris.”

The leaders on stage gasp in delight. Drek pulls a cocky grin and shakes his head.

“There she goes again,” he says. “She should be the one in charge of this shitshow. If she were, none of us would need to attend these banal meetings.”

I raise my eyebrows. That’s definitely not the takeaway I was hoping he’d get from this experience.

“All in favor of summer in Paris?” the PTA head asks. A flurry of arms go in the air. Not wanting to stand out any more than I do, I put mine up as well. Drek happily raises his. The only person against it is the previous dad, who sulks in his folding chair. “Approved. Now, let’s talk about the budget...”

Ragna sits back down, looking very pleased with herself. I wish I had even an ounce of that orc’s confidence. But I also have to question her logic. When I think of a carnival, I think of eating fried food on a stick and riding attractions with questionable safety standards. What does that have to do with France?

“If we sell an assortment of crepes between ten and fifteen dollars each, considering we sell at least a hundred, we’ll break even on the budget for building the booths. I can safely say we’ll sell even more than that.” A very pale man with slicked-back hair punches the numbers into his cellphone’s calculator app. “Mary’s crepes are literally to die for.”

A woman on stage, presumably Mary, blushes and fans herself. Another woman sitting next to her scowls. I sense some deep-rooted drama happening all around me. Is this why people come to these things? I feel like I’m trying to start watching a soap opera when it’s in the middle of its twentieth season and I don’t know any of the actors.

“Now, let’s talk about roles for the day of the event. Planning is all well and good, but we all know this is where the real volunteer work comes in. First of all, we’ll need some strong individuals to handle loading supplies and getting equipment in order. Drek and Lionel, can we count on you to do so?”

Drek blinks in surprise. He crosses his arms and frowns. He obviously wasn’t expecting to be asked to come back. I can see the word ‘no’ and some half-assed excuse about ‘being a busy orc’ ready to burst out of his downturned lips.

But then Ragna turns around in her seat and looks at us. Drek makes eye contact with her, and that air of dissent just dissipates completely.

“Yes, I’ll do it.”

My eyes go wide. I sit back and chew the inside of my mouth. What the heck was *that*?

The rest of the meeting goes by quickly. Nobody here knows me or what I’m good at, so I’m assigned to take tickets at the dunk tank. Again, I ask, what does that have to do with Paris?

Several of us, myself included, also get handed lists of local businesses to call looking for sponsorships. I have a feeling it’s a job they save for the bottom of the barrel, but I

don't care. I'm friendly, and I'm certainly not shy, so it doesn't really bother me.

The meeting adjourns, and the parents race across the hallway to the cafeteria, where the free snacks are being divided out. I wonder what's so special about punch and cookies, but then I get in line and realize it is far more than that.

"Fair trade all-natural organic green tea kombucha?" A woman offers me a paper cup with the green juice inside and I accept.

When in Rome, I guess. The snacks are an assortment of very fancy-looking chocolates and scones. These were either made by someone's private chef or ordered in bulk from a very high-end bakery.

"Why do they need a fundraiser?" I ask under my breath. "They could raise the needed funds by just not paying for these snacks."

"Abby," Drek calls. He grabs me by the arm and pulls me towards him. I'm about to give him a piece of my mind for treating me like an object again when I look up and see Ragna. "This is Ragna Silverwing. She's the mother of Tesha and Gillya Silverwing. They're twins and both prodigies on the violin."

"Oh, nice to meet you," I say, extending my hand. "So young and already playing the violin, that's incredible."

Ragna takes it and shakes. "Well, only one of them can be first chair in the school orchestra, and that's the day I'll choose my favorite."

Ragna and Drek both laugh, but something tells me she isn't joking.

"This is Abby, my, uh..." Drek fumbles as he realizes our working relationship is a little strained right now. I think he's afraid to call me the nanny and cause offense, but he also can't think of a more glamorous label that is appropriate.

"I take care of Mursha," I explain.

“Oh, Mursha is such a lovely young lady, isn’t she? So athletic. I’m sure she’ll be an excellent fencer when she’s old enough to try out.” Ragna puts a hand on Drek’s shoulder in a gesture of familiarity. He doesn’t even flinch.

I wonder how long of a history they have together. They seem very... well acquainted. Thinking about it makes me feel a little strange. I can’t describe it.

Drek puts a hand on Ragna’s back and leads her over to the table where the PTA leaders are sitting and gossiping. “Tell me, how do you handle attending these meetings while still being successful in your career? I admit, I’m finding difficulty balancing the two.”

They walk together, and I awkwardly trail behind them, sipping at my really sweet green drink.

“The key is forcing a work-life balance. All of the most successful business moguls understand this. If you work twice as hard during business hours. It frees up your time at home. You’re making all of this money, Drek, you need to spend it. Personal chef at your workplace. Boom. You never have to leave for a lunch break! Work through it.”

I frown. That sounds like terrible advice. Working twice as hard will just make him that much more tired when he is home.

“Why don’t you just hire more staff to help you run the business? You know, managers?” I ask. But Drek isn’t listening. And why would he? Ragna is from *his* world. She has the experience and success he’s craving. Who am I? Just someone who cares about his daughter.

“I always say, if it’s worth doing, do it yourself,” Drek states proudly. “I approve every single transaction personally. Most people in my position would leave it to some employee. But they’re in the wrong.”

“Exactly. Why do you think I don’t let Mr. Silverwing come to these meetings? He’d just screw it up. My girls’ education is too important. I do it all. That’s the mark of success.”

I wonder how much caffeine this woman consumes on an hourly basis. Her life sounds exhausting. But Drek keeps nodding along, hand on her back, a genuine smile on his face.

Why am I upset about this? Because I really, really am. I don't like how he's basking in Ragna's attention, or how willing she is to accept it. She's gorgeous, not just for an orc, and smart and successful. They'd have quite an affair together.

Maybe they already are. I finish my drink and start fidgeting with the empty paper cup.

Maybe I was wrong to be so stubborn with him. I really screwed it up, didn't I? I'm starting to think the fact that I push back on him is the exact reason why we wouldn't ever work. I always refuse to back down.

I had to throw a fit, demand he do things exactly my way or not at all. I wasn't any better at meeting him on his level than he was on mine, though I certainly never admitted my role in the whole mess. I just shut him out since he wasn't exactly who I wanted him to be. Well, he certainly seems to meet Ragna's standards, doesn't he?

I toss my trash in the shiny silver can and excuse myself. Too late to do anything about it now.

DREK

I t's been a long day at the office, and I'm more than ready to sit down for a minute. Before I can even get halfway across the yard, though, Mursha comes bursting out through the door and racing towards me. A wide grin stretches across her face as she barrels into me.

"Welcome home, Daddy!" she exclaims.

I smile and ruffle her hair. "It's good to be home. Now how about we go inside and –"

"Wait!" She puts her hands out in front of me before I can take even so much as a step. "You have to wait right here for just one second."

I raise an eyebrow. As much as I'd like to sit down, there's no harm in humoring her.

I put up a hand. "Alright, I'm not moving. Now what?"

Her grin becomes mischievous. "Now wait there!"

Then she races back into the house. I stand there a little flabbergasted. After a few minutes of just standing outside, I wonder if this is actually supposed to be some kind of joke.

But then Mursha comes back out of the house, this time half dragging Abby out with her. Abby looks just as confused as I feel.

"Umm, Mursha, what are we doing exactly?" Abby asks curiously.

Mursha guides her to stand right next to me, and I see her stiffen a bit. The girl puts her hands on her hips and makes a wide gesture. “Welcome, folks, to the grand opening of The Best Golden Restaurant! Your reservation is ready, and I’m going to take you to your table.”

Abby and I exchange a look. What exactly is Mursha playing at?

“Follow me right this way!” Mursha says and starts walking towards the house.

I look at Abby again, and she just shrugs. And so we follow Mursha into the house.

“Is this part of some sort of game you two have been playing?” I whisper to Abby as we walk.

She shakes her head. “Not that I’m aware of. Maybe it’s just a game of make-believe she came up with just now.”

I’d believe that if it weren’t for Mursha, who keeps glancing back at us and giggling. She’s most certainly up to something.

She leads us into the dining room, and my eyes go wide. At first glance, it just looks like a mess. But as I look closer, I begin to see that it’s much more than that.

Pictures of hearts have been taped to the walls. All the chairs but two have been taken out of the room, and they sit so close together it seems a bit awkward, considering all the space left around the table. Sparkly red glitter covers the table.

Mursha has clearly made it all on purpose. Said girl is practically beaming at us. “Tada! I made the perfect romantic dinner for you two!”

Immediately, I tense. Beside me, I can see Abby flinch.

Clearly, she knew nothing about this. I desperately wish I could take Mursha off to the side and explain to her why this isn’t a very good idea. But it’s too late for that now.

Abby clears her throat. “Oh, sweetie, this is very lovely, but I’m not sure about this. Maybe you and your dad would

like to have a daddy-daughter dinner instead?” I can hear the slight desperation in her voice.

I’m not sure whether to be offended or grateful for her words.

Mursha isn’t swayed. “Nope! I made this special for you two. You have to try it, please?”

Abby and I exchange another glance. We both know we’ve been trapped. There’s no way we can crush Mursha by saying no, even if it is extremely awkward.

Later, in private, I am definitely going to have to have a serious talk with her. If nothing else, just to help her reset her expectations. She’s putting a lot of hope into something that just isn’t there, and I don’t want her to be crushed.

I sigh. “Alright, Mursha. What do you want us to do?”

Mursha all but bounces over to the chairs. “Please have a seat. And Daddy, remember to pull out the chair for Abby! That’s what a gentleman does!”

Of all the times for the girl to remember her etiquette. And yet she seems to forget who drilled it into her head if she thinks *I* need the reminder. I pull out the chair for Abby, who stiffly takes a seat. Then I sit down beside her.

On the table are toilet paper rolls that have paper glued on top, drawn to look like fire. Candles. She’s made candles for us.

Mursha clears her throat and puts on a deep voice. “Hello, I’ll be your waiter tonight. We have a specially prepared dish made by our world-famous chef! I’ll go get it for you.”

And with that, she rushes off. Now we’re left alone together, sitting extremely close to one another.

Abby shakes her head. “Well, she’s creative, I’ll give her that.”

I frown. “This had to have taken her a while to set up. How did you not notice her setting all this up?”

Abby narrows her eyes. “Since I’ve been making phone calls looking for sponsors for a fundraiser *somebody* signed me up for, I didn’t know she was up to this. I thought she was watching TV, so I’m just as surprised as you are to see all this.”

I open my mouth to retort, but just then Mursha comes back into the room carrying two plates. She clumsily sets the plates in front of us.

“Bona ti!” she declares. It takes me a minute to realize she means bon appetit.

I look down at the plate before me. There’s a peanut butter sandwich, some string cheese, and a cup of Jello. Mursha runs off again and comes back with two small boxes of juice for each of us.

Abby smiles up at Mursha. “This looks tasty! Thank you so much for the food.”

Even though she’s doing a good job of playing along, I can tell she’s still uncomfortable. We eat our ‘dinner’ in near silence, Mursha watching us the whole time. It’s as if she expects Abby and I to suddenly fall in love at any minute, and wants to make sure she’s there to witness it.

After a while of us picking at our food and clearly not doing anything interesting, Mursha bounces off. When she returns, she has a picture in her hands.

She puts the drawing in front of us. “I made a picture for us. See, it’s our family.”

I look down at the drawing and wince. Sure enough, it’s a crude drawing of Mursha, Abby, and I all together. In the drawing, Mursha’s put hearts all around Abby and me.

Abby’s face becomes solemn, and I know we have to end this charade. It will only be more painful for Mursha later on if we keep allowing her to think that Abby and I can actually become an item. That we could be the kind of family like in her drawing.

“Mursha,” I start off gently. “You never made anything like this when Mrs. Benson was around.”

Mursha makes a face. “Ew, why would I do that? Abby’s much more fun and nice. I really like her, and I think she’d be a great mom! Don’t you?”

I take in a deep breath. “Honey, that’s not how adult relationships really work. Abby is very nice and very sweet, but that doesn’t mean she has to become your new mom. That doesn’t mean she cares about you any less, it just means that she and I aren’t together like that.”

“But you said she’s very sweet!” Mursha protests. “Don’t you like her?”

Abby steps in. “Sweetheart, people can like each other in different ways. You can’t force your dad to like me in that way. He just doesn’t.”

I sit up a little straighter. That isn’t true. Sure, we fought, but I wasn’t the one who said we shouldn’t try again. That was all Abby.

Mursha crosses her arms. “But *why* doesn’t he like-like you? You’re perfect!”

“She is perfect,” I agree.

Abby looks at me as if I’d just said she could fly.

Clearing my throat, I continue, pushing down the embarrassment. “Abby really is perfect in every way that’s important. She’s patient and kind and always tries to find laughter wherever she is.”

Slowly, I turn to face Abby. “I never knew how important laughter was until she tried to bring it into our lives. How much her smile could completely turn everything upside down. And even though I can be extremely stubborn, Abby is even more stubborn. And somehow, that’s just perfect for our family, isn’t it, Mursha?”

I can hardly believe I’ve gotten all that out, and Abby looks just as surprised. Then I remember we’re supposed to be giving Mursha a dose of reality, not making this worse, and I hurry to continue. “But two adults still have to make a choice to be a mom and a dad. And it’s more complicated than how

much you like a person. They might not want the same things that you do.”

Abby shifts awkwardly, her gaze a little sorrowful. “Or they might prefer to be with another orc,” she says quietly.

I furrow my brow. “Another orc?”

She shrugs. “It’s just that you seemed to get along with that one woman the other day at the fundraiser. Ragna. Of course, you can like whoever you want. I’m just pointing it out.”

“Ragna? Why do you bring her up?” I ask, genuinely confused. “She’s just a PTA mom.”

Abby tilts her head. “You really don’t have anything going with her? You seemed really close.”

I shake my head. “With Ragna? I don’t even attend school events that often, you know that. I was trying to pawn this one off on you,” I say with a grin. “I probably spend about twenty minutes around her every six months, and none of them are nearly as memorable as one soccer practice watching you, I can tell you that for sure.”

Abby seems to relax a little then. Then she looks a little astounded. Suddenly she looks shy.

“And you really meant what you said about me?” she asks softly.

I huff. “Since when have you ever known me to say something I didn’t mean?”

A smile tugs up on the corners of her lips. Then a giggle escapes her and she shakes her head. “Only when you’re being extra grumpy and don’t want anyone to know you care,” she teases.

Despite myself, I feel a small smile of my own tugging on my lips. Beside us, Mursha practically beams. “See?” she demands. “I’m very wise for my age. Mrs. McGonagle said so.”

ABBY

“Are you ready?” I ask Mursha, hiding my disappointment that Drek won’t be coming to practice with us. Our romantic ‘dinner’ with Mursha was great, unforgettable even, but we didn’t have much time to discuss what the practical outcome of everything would be.

Between having a six-year-old for an audience, and the fact that Mursha and I now have to get to soccer practice, it’ll have to wait. Drek can’t come with us today, which is a little disappointing. I know it’s just the way that he is, but I wish he didn’t take his work quite so seriously.

“I want to be the goalie for the whole practice,” she states, not struggling as I help her with her coat. I think she likes the extra attention, so I don’t let on that I know full well she can put her own light jacket on. It’s the same reason why I know she’ll understand my answer.

“Honey, I know you’re really good at protecting the net. That’s why I need you on the field sometimes to make sure the girls are doing what you do. And you can see better out there, right?”

She’s not the least bit excited, and I wonder if her silence means the wheels in her head are turning. Is she going to argue? Like a normal six-year-old?

“I can do that for a little bit,” she admits with a calm face, jumping up and down as an idea hits her. Her eyes always go wide when she’s caught a fresh thought from the ethers. This time can’t be any different. “But I want to protect the net

first.” She adjusts her sleeves, then stares up at me. “Because I have to show them how and all that,” she adds.

“Great point. Deal.”

We shake on it and head to practice. About halfway through, I finally decide it *is* a good idea Drek didn’t tag along. A few of the girls keep picking the ball up with their hands, again, and there’s no way I can finagle them to use their feet *and* pay attention to Drek at the same time.

Not successfully at least, that I can definitely admit to myself. I’m still thinking about him and smiling on the drive home. Mursha and I sing along to pop tunes while I promise her a good snack for her hard work.

I’m eager to see Drek if, fingers crossed, he’s done working his tusks to the quick. Maybe if I can get Mursha settled in with a coloring book or favorite movie, I can plan a little surprise of my own for him. Drek’s done it. Mursha’s done it.

It’s my turn now, I think as we pull up to the house. Who knew he would be my greatest distraction?

“Oooh! Oooh!” Mursha squeals, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I’m happy to see Drek’s preferred car in the drive, but wonder what a balloon museum — it’s the only way I can describe it — is doing peppered along the walkway.

“It’s a balloon garden!” I hear the click of Mursha’s seat belt and hold my hand up to stop her.

I squint at the colorful and sporadic display of balloon-flowers and figures. The whole thing must have taken the inventory from three party supply shops easily.

“Let’s stop first,” I say, practically pulling my chin off my lap. Drek’s definitely been up to something, and I can’t wait to see inside. “It’d be a shame if we hurt ourselves trying to get to the garden.”

“I thought he wasn’t listening!” she explains, which clears up absolutely nothing for me.

“What’s a balloon garden?” I ask as soon as I park, unlocking Mursha’s door the second I do. She’s too busy shimmying out of her car seat to answer my perfectly reasonable question.



“SO DO YOU LIKE IT?” Drek asks, motioning to the elaborate puppet show set up in his home theater. Rather than a few rows of sleek and empty overstuffed chairs, an audience of oversized stuffed animals greet us.

Mursha squeals and runs to the team of puppeteers dressed in black. Various puppets and props rest neatly behind them on a makeshift stage. Who did Drek hire to do this, actual theater people?

“I love it!” she says over her shoulder as he squeezes my hand.

“Where are you going?” he asks.

“To enjoy the show? I’m not missing this!” He pulls me into an embrace, kissing me on the forehead.

“I’ll tell you all about it at dinner,” he explains. “You have a masseuse to fall asleep on.”

Ingrid’s hands are heavenly. I didn’t know the back of my legs were so sore, let alone my neck and shoulders, until she began her magic. The hour and a half I spend on the plushiest massage table, overlooking the prettiest view of the grounds, leaves me feeling like a puddle of butter once it’s over.

My stomach growls as I rinse off with a deluge of new beauty products. The romantic sandwich Mursha made for me earlier wasn’t exactly enough to make a meal, I realize. Body and face wash, shampoo, conditioner, lotion, and an aromatic shower bomb are just some of the trinkets I see around me. I’m too hungry to do much more than lather my face with a serum marked with my name before heading downstairs toward the smell of food.

“Mursha’s been entertained, fed, and sent off to bed. We’re alone for the night once the staff cleans up and gets out of here. I’m guessing Ingrid rocked your world?” Drek asks as soon as the chef he hired exits the dining room.

“Jealous?” I answer.

“Yes,” he says plainly, squeezing my knee under the table. I’m still wearing my new robe, which feels like a hug from a cloud more than it does a garment. Not for a mere mortal at least.

“I’m not going to argue with that,” I explain through a mouth of lobster-stuffed ravioli. He winks at me, then takes a deep sip from his wine glass. “What should we toast to?”

“You nailing this date,” I offer without a second thought and take my own deep drink. The wine goes down smoothly, just like everything else Drek’s surprised me with. “It’s so funny. I was just thinking how it was my turn to plan something.”

He cocks his head, and I explain how he and Mursha have inspired me.

“Well, that date wasn’t exactly a smash,” he explains, obviously referring to our dinner debacle and not Mursha’s adorable meal.

“Fair enough,” I say. “But in the spirit of not spoiling the night with a bad vibe, how was the puppet show?”

“Worth it.” He says this like he’s surprised. “I’ve never seen such a rendition of A Thousand and One Arabian Nights. We should have them back.”

“Maybe you have a career in kids’ party planning,” I suggest. “I can see your ad now.”

“This is just my face? Trust me with your kids,” he suggests, pleased with his own observation.

I frown. “We’ll work on it.” He leans forward and plants a kiss on my lips. “You taste like ravioli,” I purr.

“You, too,” he replies and regales me with a few of his favorite parts of the puppet show. I never expected him to

loathe the sultan so much, since Drek's his own special brand of stringent — though admittedly not murderous.

“I read it a long time ago when I was a kid,” I say as soon as I can get a word in. All jokes aside, Mursha and Drek could really bond over their love of a good performance. “I bet Mursha won't forget tonight. Ever.”

“I hope she's not the only one,” he adds, squeezing my knee under the table again.

“I'm going to answer that by asking a question. Did this chef of yours make leftovers?”

“They're already in their own Tupperware containers,” he answers, gesturing to the entirety of the spread.

“Even the handmade blue cheese dressing?” I point to my empty salad plate.

“And the Parmesan sourdough bread that came with the bisque,” he informs me, dabbing my sauce-covered chin with a cloth napkin.

“What I'm hearing is there isn't any more bisque,” I tease.

“You'll just have to tiptoe downstairs in the middle of the night and find out,” he teases back.

“I couldn't possibly have a midnight snack right now,” I confess, leaning back to rub my stuffed belly.

“Dessert is carrot cake,” he explains, and my mouth waters just at the mention.

If dessert is anything like the rest of the meal, the whole evening really, there's no doubt in my mind he's right about calling it a masterpiece.

“This *is* the carrot cake to end all carrot cakes,” I say through a mouthful of my new favorite dessert. “If I could live in any food, it would be this.”

“Why would you live in food?” he asks.

His classic confused face makes me smile. “Extenuating circumstances,” I explain casually. “A dire situation, perhaps.”

If I was abandoned in the woods by my father, I'd be lured in by a witch with a house made of this."

"I'll let Gaston know," he replies, and I figure it's the name of the chef.

"Don't. I'm sure he's tired of hearing about his work at this point," I explain. "The curse of being perfect, too many compliments."

"So does that mean you're sick of hearing them, too?"

It takes me a second to realize he's being coy. I want to remind him of all the corrections he was happy to make about my coaching style but bite my lip instead.

"Thank you for coming around," I tease. "I knew you'd be obsessed with me if you gave me a chance."

"No, you didn't." He smiles, and it's my turn to kiss him on the lips.

I feel a sense of calm wash over me, similar to that delicious massage Drek treated me to, only deeper this time. If before I was melted butter, now I'm mist in the atmosphere. I feel that light.

"Can I admit something to you?" Drek asks, his voice soft.

I smile and nod, genuinely eager to hear whatever admission falls out of his mouth. Even if it's a well-meaning but back-handed compliment. It is Drek, after all.

"I'm falling in love with you," he says, and I have to grip the fork in my hand to keep from dropping it. What did he just say? "Or that is to say, I love you already."

My lips move, but at first, nothing comes out. "I... I love you, too," I finally say, and the frown forming on his face turns into a smile.

DREK

This moment is different. I can't explain it entirely, but where our first encounter saw me propelled by lust, something about tonight is begging me to go slow. It feels softer, less urgent. I feel ready to give as much of myself to Abby as possible.

I take her by the hand and help her stand up.

“Would you like to retire with me to my bedroom?” I ask. There's a hint of nervousness in my voice. I hope it doesn't turn her off.

But Abby just smiles and nods her head. Her hands are slightly trembling. She must be nervous, too. How strange, that we can both feel this way when we've already had sex before.

This time just feels different somehow. More meaningful, maybe. We've said we love each other. We've come back from a fight that could have ended us, and we're now stronger than ever.

We check in with Mursha, who is absolutely exhausted from her exciting evening and snoring away in her bed. Satisfied, I back out of her room, closing the door quietly.

“Now, where were we?” I ask.

We take a few steps down the hallway before I can't help myself. I grab Abby again and kiss her. My hand cups her cheek as she stands on her toes to try and deepen our

connection. Her hands grip my shoulders, and she lets out the tiniest little moan.

The sound drives me wild. I break off our kiss and bend down to pick Abby up. She feels so good in my arms as I cradle her bridal style. I take her over to my master bedroom and walk us in, closing the door with my foot. Then I gently lay her down on the bed.

Abby reaches up and grabs me by the collar to pull me down on top of her. I happily oblige and lock our lips together once again.

We simply lay like that for a long time, just kissing and nipping each other and letting our feelings saturate the air around us.

“I love you too, Drek.” Her words from earlier at dinner play on repeat in my mind. I can’t stop thinking about what a perfect moment it was. How everything we’ve been through has culminated to this moment. I love this woman, and she is mine now.

I want to show her exactly what that means.

When the growing pressure inside becomes too much, I sit up to start undressing. Abby whines in disappointment, but quickly changes her tune when I pull off my collared button-down and undershirt, revealing my muscular chest.

Her hands fly back up to grope at my pectoral muscles. I can’t help but smirk with pride. She didn’t get a chance to admire what she won last time. I’ll make sure she gets plenty of me tonight.

I unbuckle my belt, and Abby has my pants undone by the time I’m finished removing it. She pulls my pants and boxers down my hips to let my cock bob free. I can see a delicious hunger in her eyes.

She reaches out and grasps the base of my shaft while running her tongue over the tip. I groan at the warm wetness, urging her to continue. Abby gently places my cock in her mouth and teases me more, running her tongue all over.

I place my hand on the top of her head and gently urge her further down. She complies, and I breathe a sigh of pleasure as she takes me as far as she can. Abby is good, she knows exactly how much suction to give without biting. She bobs her head in time with my guidance, up and down. Her right hand keeps pace with her lips as her left cradles my balls.

The pressure is building. Looking into her beautiful emerald eyes, I know I'll go more than once tonight. So I let my head fall back and begin to thrust as I hold Abby's head still. She moans, deep and satisfied, as I gently fuck her gorgeous mouth.

"Take it, Abby," I groan. "Take it for me." She does. I cum, and she keeps her mouth in place until I've finished giving her every ounce of my load.

She looks up at me and slowly pulls back, a line of saliva connecting her lips to the tip of my twitching cock. That sight already gets me half hard again.

I wipe her lips with my thumb and urge her to stand so I can slowly undress her. She sighs and moans as I replace each article of clothing with my lips until she's completely naked. Then, on my knees, I urge her legs apart and give her a well earned reward.

Abby chokes back a shocked gasp as my tongue slides over her pussy. I use my fingers to spread her lips and give myself better access to please her. Abby runs her hands through my hair as I lap at her clit, teasing her entrance with my fingers as I do. I feel her legs begin to shake. Abby bends over my head, trying not to fall over as she groans my name over and over.

"Drek! Oh my God, Drek, please!" she cries. Her nails dig into my scalp as her hips begin to buckle. I cup her ass with my hands and hold her pussy against my mouth. Every lick of her sweet wetness gets me harder until I'm fully erect again and ready.

But first, I want to make her come like this. She's so close, I can feel it by the way she's trembling. Just a little bit longer and –!

“Drek!” she cries, slapping a hand over her mouth. Abby collapses over me, her legs going weak as she comes on my face. I let her ride me through it, delighting in every muscle twitch and spasm.

When she’s finished, I stand and lay her back down on the bed. She rests her arms on the mattress by her head, staring up at me with half-lidded eyes and trying to catch her breath. No need for that, we’re far from done.

I lift her legs up and hook her ankles on my shoulders. I hold my cock and use the tip to play at her entrance. She’s soaking wet from her orgasm, and I delight in hearing her gasps from the stimulation.

“Are you ready?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

“Yes, fuck, yes,” Abby sighs. I push forward and slide in, feeling only the slightest resistance as I stretch her walls around me. Abby reaches behind her head and grips the sheets. I pause a moment to let her adjust, and she looks at me with wide eyes. “Why’d you stop?”

I chuckle and lean down over her body, letting her legs fold around my hips. I take her face in my left hand and kiss her sweet, red lips as I slowly begin to move. I can practically feel Abby melt as I slide in and out of her.

She threads her arms around my neck and moans into my mouth. Every sigh of pleasure she gives me is met with a deeper thrust.

Abby pulls away from my mouth for a moment. “I love you,” she whispers. Her breath hitches as I thrust in deep, watching those green eyes sparkle. “I love you, Drek.”

I kiss her, more forcefully. I want her to know she’s mine. I pull away and run my tongue across her throat while picking up the speed of my thrusts.

“My heart is yours,” I tell her. Abby shivers at the statement, holding me even tighter. I want us to stay like this forever, but I know it simply cannot last. Abby is gripping my cock tight. Her breath is becoming faster and more shallow. And I can feel my own pressure tipping over the edge.

I reach down between our bodies and find her clit. I want her to come with me. Abby cries out at the touch. Her face flushes, and her eyes shut tight.

“Drek, please, Drek!” Abby’s body clenches around me. The sudden pressure engulfs my senses and I grunt, releasing myself as we come together. We both moan in a haze, riding our mutual pleasure out to the end.

When I catch my breath, I let myself fall onto the mattress on my back with a deep sigh. Abby rolls over and rests her head on my chest. I wrap my arm around her waist and hold her close. I don’t even mind how sweaty we both are, this feels perfect.

After a few minutes, Abby lifts her head and looks me in the eye. “I mean it, you know,” she says. “I mean it when I said I love you.”

She looks so serious all of a sudden, it almost makes me laugh. Instead, I reach up and run a finger across her pink cheek.

“So do I,” I reply.

She smiles gently. “Please don’t break my heart, Drek.”

“I won’t,” I state firmly. I prop myself up on my elbow so I can kiss her once again. “Never.”

This seems to satisfy her. I run my finger down her jawline and under her chin. I don’t want her to doubt my feelings for her, ever.

“Thank you,” she says. Abby looks exhausted but sated. I want to keep showering her with pleasure, but I’m feeling the same exhaustion pulling me down. Still, there’s one thing I can think of to really end this night right.

“Would you like some more carrot cake?” I ask. Her eyes light up again at the offer. I hope I can always make her look this happy.

ABBY

“**Y**ou can do it, Freya! You can do it!” I holler as the little witch clutches the soccer ball, running circles around the ref, Mr. Jespers, and loving the laughter of the crowd. “Just let go of the ball, honey! Good job!”

I fail to hear a scoff behind me and wonder if Drek is no longer standing where I last saw him. Didn't he just hear me cheering on a kid who's technically doing a bad job? I spin on my heel as soon as Freya hands Jespers the ball.

“What?” he asks, though the smirk on his face tells me he knows exactly why I was checking for him.

“Did you just keep a scoff to yourself?” I ask, my voice dripping with mock surprise.

“I happen to love the way Freya...” He trails off and studies a few dowdy clouds in the sky. “Freestyles the game.”

I chuckle and turn back to my girls and the game. The *final* game. How did the season go by so fast? “You're so lucky you're not under oath right now.”

“I'd pass a polygraph, just know that. Go ask my lawyer.” He gestures with his head in a random direction, as if his representative's office is right down the street.

“Maybe I will.” I shrug, proud of how casual I sound. It feels good to be playful with Drek, whose humor is dry I've discovered. He's not always missing the joke like I originally thought, though he tends to still take things more literally than I can always understand.

“Maybe you should.” I grit my teeth and keep my face from smirking. He’s much, much better at acting serious. Probably from all the years of practice.

I cross my arms, slit my eyes, and look up at him. “Don’t tell me what to do.” It’s my best impression of being offended, and it wins me a head shake and a slight grin.

Worth it, I think as Freya once again grabs the soccer ball with her hands. Jesper’s whistle is between the ref’s lips in an instant. He blows a quick three times, all of which go ignored by the witch.

“Freya! What did we talk about?” The wide-eyed and rosy-cheeked girl looks my way. Without blinking, she heaves the ball over her head and behind her. It sails in an impressive arc, which I have to move my neck to trace. Tania leaps up and snags the ball out of mid-air with both hands. A perfect execution. But technically not allowed.

“Tania! Use your feet like we practiced!” I cup my hands over my mouth. “What do you walk with? Kick with those, okay?”

“Okay!” She complies by drop-kicking the ball halfway across the field.

The small crowd of friends and family love it, and I suspect the cheering has more to do with Freya and Tania than the game itself. Not a single score’s been made, so I don’t blame the stands for egging them on.

“Maybe she’s got a future in rugby,” Drek whispers as Jespers continues blowing his whistle.

After the game, which ended in a draw since no points were scored, the whole team meets at the local pizza place, Great Cheese Nation.

“You should wear the thing that I have, Daddy,” Mursha suggests as soon as I tie a neon green and pink bib around her. The place is packed, but luckily, Drek was smart enough to call ahead and reserve a space — as well as order ahead.

Waiters bring out four separate pizzas, and I notice the variety must have been done with everyone in mind.

“Pineapple!” Freya and Tania say, clapping their hands until a few other teammates chime in.

But not Mursha, who clutches an identical bib in her hand. I hide a smirk behind my hand, knowing Drek must be at a loss for words.

“You know, honey, I would. I really would.” Drek grabs himself a slice of what I think is a Mediterranean pizza, given the smorgasbord of feta, olives, and tomatoes. “But it looks like there’s only one more of those left on the table and Abby’s shirt looks pretty lonely.”

“Real mature,” I chuckle as I slip the bib around me.

“Says the woman rocking a bib.”

“Yes, but is she pulling it off?” I play with my straw a little, stirring it around my soda water before grabbing a piece of feta off his plate. “That’s the real question.”

I smile his way as Mursha gives me a quizzical look. “My arms aren’t big enough to help me.” She reaches toward the pizza as if to showcase her complete helplessness.

“Pardon me, madam,” I reply, gesturing to the pizzas.

She picks her slice, and the same goes for the rest of the team. By the time Drek and I, any of the adults, get back to our own plates, we’re chewing on cold slices.

“You’re a good soccer coach,” Drek comments, dabbing his lips with a cloth napkin.

“Where did you get a cloth napkin?” I’m afraid to ask the question, but at the same time, I’m dying to know the answer.

“I brought it with me.”

Of course, he did. “Why?” I ask, the question coming out like a laugh.

He gestures to the tables, each with their own napkin dispenser. “Because this place doesn’t have them. I asked when I made the reservation. It was just a feeling I had.”

“Of course you did.” I smile, then look over to see what Mursha is doing over at the arcade section.

“I’m a prepared person, Abby.” His calm voice tickles my ear. “Go ahead, ask me if I have an extra one in the car.”

“Why, when I already know the answer?” He squeezes my knee, and I squirm because I’m ticklish.

“You’re making a scene,” I tease, gesturing to the myriad people not looking at us. “Someone’s about to call the cops.”

“Then I’ll make this quick.” He plants a kiss on my lips, then another.

“You taste like feta and hot sauce,” I coo.

“Lucky you,” he purrs just as the check comes.

The burly owner plops the black card holder onto the table, giving Drek a thumbs up and me a wink. I squeeze Drek’s knee in an effort to keep him quiet. The man is just playing, after all.

“You thought I was going to say something nasty, didn’t you?” he asks as soon as we’re through the front door. A sleeping Mursha is draped over him, so we try to keep our voices hushed.

“I don’t know. Maybe,” I reply. “You’re not one to be jovial. And I’ve had first-hand experience, so yeah, maybe I was a little worried.”

“There’s nothing jovial about a proprietor crossing the line. Would he do that to foreign dignitaries or the mayor? His mother? I don’t think so.”

I pretend to think, tapping a finger on my chin. “I don’t know. It depends. Are we talking about the wink or the thumbs up?” I can’t help myself and relish the eye roll he gives me.

“Just admit you thought I was going to bite his head off, and that tonight, I surprised you. I played it cool.” He gives me a little smile. It’s contagious.

I grin. “Maybe you have –”

“Bite who’s head off, Daddy?” Mursha asks drowsily, her face still wet from the wipes Drek carefully wiped across her sleeping face.

“No, honey. Abby was just joking. I—”

“Don’t hurt any of my friends.” Her voice is muffled as she sluggishly turns into her father’s broad chest.

“I’m not—” He notes the finger up to my mouth and doesn’t finish the sentence. “She better not be friends with that guy,” he whispers.

“I’ll look into it tomorrow if it’ll help you sleep,” I tease in my own hushed tone, opening the door for him to easily slip Mursha into bed. I roll my eyes as he passes and watch him lay his snoring little girl onto her bed.

He’s come a long way in the nurturing department, and part of me can’t wait to see how much further he goes with the new concept. Though a bigger part of me wants to freeze this moment, even for just a day or two.

“What are you smiling about?” he whispers, twisting the doorknob shut.

“A lot of things,” I reply and reach up to peck him on the cheek. “I have a surprise for you.”

“Really?” He wraps his hands around my waist and squeezes me tight.

“Yep,” I admit, reaching up on my tiptoes to brush my lips against his. “And it’s just one word.”

“Sex.” It’s not a question, and I smirk at his total lack of imagination.

“Leftovers,” I whisper provocatively into his ear. “Or better put, a whole pizza to ourselves.”

“The Great Cheese Nation doesn’t deliver,” he corrects as if I would lie to him about something as important as artisan pizza all to ourselves.

“Which is why your beautiful girlfriend ordered one from Thumbs Up Guy after you paid the bill. Had em’ slip the pie into the trunk when it was done.”

I cross my arms and wait for my apology. Or a thank you. Either one will do. Instead, he lifts me up and carries me

downstairs. We're not quiet, and by the time we get to the car and back with our pizza, Mursha is at the base of the stairs. Her sleepy eyes widen as she sees the box of pizza.

“Midnight snack! Midnight snack!”

We look at each other and smile. A midnight snack for three it is.

DREK

The morning of the fundraiser dawns bright and clear. Abby and I are up and ready to go along with the sun. Neither of us are strangers to early mornings, but the crowd we see already gathered at the school has us halting in our steps as we approach.

“Were you expecting this many people?” I question discreetly, hefting our supplies for better balance.

“More people equals a more successful fundraiser,” Abby replies. Her chipper tone is stifled by an abrupt yawn, which she quickly clamps down on. Although I secretly share the sentiment, we have both learned not to do anything that would upset the planning committee.

Honestly, I’d much rather be in bed, preferably cuddling with the petite soccer coach by my side, but I won’t back out now. It’s the least I can do after all, considering my thoughtlessness when I volunteered Abby for this task. I’ve shouldered my fair share of responsibility as both a parent and as a CEO, so a simple fundraiser shouldn’t be too difficult.

Of course, a few hours later, I find myself eating my own words. What the hell was I thinking, signing us up for this controlled chaos? Even not knowing the first thing about school fundraisers, I can tell that this one has quickly gotten out of hand.

We’ve been relying on Ragna and her lackeys, who I know in passing as we tend to run in similar circles in the corporate world. She has always struck me as clever and competent,

although now I'm beginning to doubt her judgment. It's clear that this event has become a parental competition disguised as charity.

The area has turned into a caricature of Paris, complete with a jumble of replicas of the city's most famous attractions. There is an obstacle course of one hundred bridges, bound together by a makeshift lazy river Seine with a scaled-down Eiffel Tower at the center. The area for the vendor stalls has been remodeled to resemble Champs-Elysees. There is a silent auction being held inside a clear plastic tent that is meant to symbolize the Louvre and even a horror fun-house thing that combines the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles with Paris's famous catacombs.

It's more overwhelming rather than impressive, and the authenticity seems to be lost on the children in attendance. Which is fair, considering the largest demographic group is between the ages of four and eight. Most of them seem set on vandalizing or destroying most of the decorations. Luckily, someone had the foresight to make the statues out of wax.

I leave Abby running the ticket counter — an awning that has been transformed into a miniature Arc de Triomphe — while I fit into my role as one of the overseeing attendants. As the day progresses, I come to the conclusion that Abby has actually scored the easiest job out of all the volunteers, as I observe multiple stands and activities devolve into minor anarchy. Between fishing more kids out of the 'Seine' than the course itself and righting the Thinking Man 'statue' for the umpteenth time, I am utterly exhausted and looking forward to some relief.

Strangely enough, I have a growing appreciation for how ready Abby always is to volunteer in the community. It only climbs higher each time someone else calls me over to correct yet another issue. Seriously, I run a million-dollar company on a daily basis, and I feel I have never had a job that has been as demanding as volunteer work. Feeling like I've been putting proverbial fires out all morning, I'm grateful for when I am able to take a break and rejoin Abby.

“Whew, what a hoopla,” she says as she hands me a complimentary lemonade.

I take a sip in silent appreciation, then grimace as I realize that they’ve been serving sparkling lemonade. Seriously, is there anything at this event that is actually geared toward the children?

“I know, right?” Abby seems to read enough of my thoughts by the expression on my face. “Marissa thought that sparkling lemonade could be a fun substitute for champagne, and simulate thoughts of summer at the same time.”

“They weren’t actually thinking of serving champagne, were they?” I ask incredulously.

“Oh, no,” Abby replies easily, tilting her head back with a laugh. “They just wanted something to keep in line with the Parisian theme. As you may have noticed with some of these moms, once they get an idea, they’re like a dog with a bone.”

“I can’t believe the PTA has let this get so out of hand,” I mutter, trying not to be distracted by the slender lines of her supple neck. “Didn’t anyone try to incorporate things that kids would actually enjoy? Which one is Marissa again?”

Abby tilts her iridescent solo cup towards the enchantress in the distance, looking worse for wear as she tries to pull an impish boy who has taken to swinging from the Moulin Rouge windmill. “I think her kid is in the same class as Ragna’s girls. They’ve formed their own sub-committee. PTA clique, I think.”

“Let them have it,” I reply, shuddering. “I’m never volunteering again, or signing you up unwittingly either.”

“Eh, it’s not so bad,” Abby returns with one of her world-class smiles. “Mursha is having a good time after all, so that’s worth something. Besides, as they say, when in Rome and whatnot.”

“Or Paris, in this case,” I correct automatically.

Abby looks up at me, feigning shock. “Why Mr. Orgun, did you just make a joke?”

I wryly raise an eyebrow in her direction. “While it may come as a shock, I do possess other talents apart from excellent parenting, running a company, and fancy table manners.”

“Admittedly, those skills do come in handy.” Abby is still grinning at me, and I take that as a good sign. “Also, to answer your question, yes, there were members of the committee who took the children into consideration,” she answers, casting her eye toward the distance.

I follow her gaze to see a mime and a harlequin clown moving around each other, in some sort of inexplicable routine for a nearby crowd. Even as I watch, one of the younger children opens their mouth to let out a wail as frightened tears spill down their cheeks. “Oh, no,” comes my dismayed mutter.

“Guess that means break time is over,” Abby comments all too cheerfully.

The day continues in much the same way, where I manage to find one solution and then five more problems crop up. I have to call upon my years of work experience and business acumen in order to maintain my sanity. Yet overall, the event seems to be a success, even if we’ll only end up breaking even due to the expenses accrued.

About mid-afternoon is when the most problematic incident occurs. In hindsight, I should have seen it coming, especially when I overheard one of the parents mention that the skulls for the ‘catacombs’ were really just painted bouncy balls. When I find the parent whose brilliant idea it was to put a display of bouncy balls next to the Hall of Mirrors, I’m not entirely sure what I’ll do, but I guarantee it won’t be pretty.

It’s the kind of crash that resounds throughout the area. Several parents whip around in alarm, but for once I’m not thinking of them but of the children standing nearby when a couple of the fun-house mirrors shatter. The culprits are a couple of the older kids who shouldn’t have been left unattended anyway. They had decided to test the efficacy of the bouncy skulls with a rousing game of dodgeball.

I'm about to lay into them for their irresponsible behavior when a pair of familiar bright eyes steps into my vision. Abby is grabbing a ham and cheese crepe from the nearby stand and is coincidentally the nearest adult beside me to the broken glass. In addition to the troublemakers, there are quite a few younger children who are startled by the accident, panicked by the ensuing chaos of literal rolling skulls suddenly everywhere.

Ms. Mallet is quicker than I am to react, however. Even as I open my mouth to shout, she is by my side with a couple of brooms and an oversized dustpan. "Why don't you show these guys how to properly clean up while I take the youngsters here to go through some drills?"

"Huh?" I'm so caught off-guard by her quick thinking that I can only formulate a less-than-articulate response.

She kicks up one of the runaway bouncy skulls and in a practiced maneuver, catches it easily in the crook of her ankle. "Like they say, when in Paris, right? Come on, kids!" she calls out to the more anxious-looking ones. "I'll show you guys some cool soccer moves."

Abby deftly begins to usher the little ones away from all the sharp debris, when Ragna comes barreling forward. "Excuse me, but those skulls are part of the catacombs display," the female Orc tersely retorts.

"Ragna, there's been an accident. It would be safer to move the children away from the glass," I calmly interject, casting a grateful look at the soccer coach-turned-nanny.

"But... but it will mess with the whole motif!" she exclaims, her tone bordering on whining. I really thought she was a capable woman, but seeing her behavior now is causing me to reassess that opinion.

"You do know that Paris is home to one of the largest football stadiums in the entire world, don't you?" Abby informs, standing firmly between the kids and the mess.

"So you'd rather teach them about touchdowns, than have them participate in this fundraiser we all worked so hard to put

together?” the manicured mother questions acidly.

“Soccer is called football globally,” I correct her, pinching the bridge of my nose in frustration. “And right now, it’s more important to keep the kids safe so they can keep having fun. Thanks, Abby.” I nod in the brunette’s direction.

She shoots me a grateful smile, one that warms my insides despite the early autumn chill. Without further ado, she ushers the kids away, grabbing a few more skulls that have rolled away from the glass. Turning back, I help the other kids clean and think about how, in spite of being opposites, Abby and I actually do make a good team.

ABBY

For weeks it's felt like I've been on overdrive with everything going on. And now that the fundraiser is over and soccer season has ended, I have more free time than I know what to do with.

"Can you believe there's actually this many hours in the day?" I comment to Drek one day as we lounge in the garden chairs reading, just enjoying the sunshine. It's nearly Halloween, but the day is unseasonably warm.

He huffs from his chair. "Is there? I seem to be losing more and more every day. If you could tell me where you find these hours, please let me know."

I laugh and then tilt my head back and take in a deep breath. "Apparently they're tucked between soccer practice and school fundraisers. So I guess get really really busy and then drop everything."

Drek grunts but a smile forms on his face. "You have been quite busy lately."

"You've been busier than usual, too. After all, you did help with the fundraiser and you've been going to most of Mursha's practices and games. Don't you feel like you suddenly have a few more hours in the day?"

He seems to contemplate this for a moment before nodding. "I suppose you're right. After all, I can't think of a time recently where we've just gotten to sit out here and do this."

We're just relaxing outside while Mursha plays with her toys on a picnic blanket. We'd eaten a picnic lunch out here earlier. Even though Drek had been confused at first as to why we couldn't just eat on the picnic table.

"So, now that you have so much free time, what exactly do you plan to do with it?" Drek asks.

I've actually been thinking about this for a while. I have my teaching degree, but I'm not sure anymore if I want to teach in a traditional classroom forever. It was once my dream, but since I have yet to be brought on full-time by any school and have only been working as a substitute, maybe it's the perfect time to reassess my plan.

Getting to teach the girls soccer in my own way and just have fun with them has been incredible. And they still learned something while having fun. It's an element that I think a lot of schools and lesson plans are lacking nowadays.

"I think I might go back to school and get my master's degree," I finally tell him.

He frowns. "But you just graduated. You really want to go back?"

I snort. "Well, maybe *want* to go back to school is a bit of an exaggeration. But I need to if I want to get to where I want to be in the future."

He gives me an inquisitive look and I explain. "I know I still need to get some experience in the classroom first, but I don't think I always want to be just a teacher. If I have a master's degree, then hopefully after having some years of teaching under my belt, I can maybe get a job writing curriculum. Iron out my ideas that I have to make school a better place for kids to really thrive."

Drek chuckles a bit. "That sounds exactly like you. Bringing laughter and warmth wherever you go."

"So you think it's a good idea?" I ask.

He nods. "I think it sounds like an excellent idea."

I don't even know I'm tense until he says the words and I suddenly relax. I've been a little afraid he'd think it was a silly, far-fetched dream. It feels a little embarrassing to admit out loud that I don't even have a teaching job yet and I'm already imagining what could come after that. But instead, he sounds incredibly supportive of it all.

He shifts in his chair, and if I didn't know any better, I'd say he almost seems nervous. "And in the future, do you see us there with you?"

I blink in surprise, then I feel the tips of my ears burn with embarrassment. Because of course, I had.

In my dreams of the future, I'm walking Mursha to the door on her first day of school every year. Dreams of Drek and I going on cute dates fill my mind. Helping Mursha get ready for her first dance and helping her put on makeup for real soon follow. I long for more days where Drek and I just sit and talk with one another.

I smile sheepishly at him. "Both of you are always in my future when I think about it. Sometimes I can't remember a time where you two weren't in it in some way."

A thoughtful look comes across his face.

"And do I ever come to mind when you think of the future?" I ask hesitantly. Drek is incredibly practical. He may have very well factored in that this might all go wrong, and I could hardly blame him if he did. He thinks with his head more than his heart, so I steel myself for whatever answer he might give me.

What I don't expect is for an almost mischievous smile to tug at his lips. "You, my dear, are thoroughly intertwined with my thoughts of the future."

I all but melt at the words. Good, the feeling is mutual then.

"As much as I enjoy talking about the future, I'm glad to have just our ready-made family right now," I say. "And on that note, I think we should all do something fun together."

“An outing!” Mursha exclaims, bounding up to us. I could almost swear the girl has a radar up for when someone is talking about something fun.

I grin at her. “That’s right. Any ideas of what we should do?”

She barely thinks about it for half a moment before her eyes light up. “We should go to a trampoline park!”

A trampoline park. I haven’t been to one of those in ages. “That sounds like fun to me!” I tell her.

Drek furrows his brow. “What is a park of trampolines?”

My grin widens. Oh, now we definitely have to go to one. Seeing Drek on a trampoline will be worth the price of admission all on its own.

The next day, we head to the trampoline park. Drek takes it in with a wary look. But it’s too late. We’re already inside with our day passes.

Drek sniffs the air, no doubt taking note of the smell of rubber mixed with feet and sweat.

“And this is where you wanted to spend the day?” he asks Mursha cautiously.

Mursha nods enthusiastically. “Yeah! They have trampolines everywhere, even on the walls!”

He gives me a confused look, and I just giggle. “Come on, it’s just something you’re going to have to experience firsthand.”

Mursha is right at home bouncing all over the place. Drek walks over it all like he’s walking on eggshells. That has to change.

I bounce over to him and spring up as high as I can. When I come down, I’m mere inches away from him, and it causes him to bounce into the air, too. His arms windmill as he’s sent flying into the air, and the completely unguarded expression of bafflement makes me burst out laughing.

Drek lands very ungracefully on his ass, and Mursha starts laughing, too. Quickly recovering, he turns his attention to his daughter. “Oh, you think that’s funny? Why don’t we see how high I can bounce you?”

Mursha shrieks in mock terror as Drek chases after her. I watch all this unfold with an ear-splitting smile.

He’s come so far since I first met him. When I first started as a nanny, he would have thought all of this too childish and unimportant. But now he sees that his daughter just needs the chance to be a regular kid who does regular kid things. And he’s not ashamed anymore to indulge her in her little games.

Even if he still doesn’t understand everything about kids, he’s still willing to learn. To listen. And when he does let loose like this, it’s so incredibly charming and sweet to see that I almost fall for him all over again seeing him this way.

I couldn’t be more proud of him for stepping up and becoming the father I knew he could be.

Deciding I’ve stood by the sidelines long enough, I jump after them, telling Mursha that I’m coming to her rescue.

After an hour or so of running around and bouncing, Drek and I sit down on a bench, both of us completely worn out.

“Who could have guessed that just bouncing could be so exhausting,” Drek mutters, a small smile on his face.

I snort. “I know right? But this is a place designed for kids, and kids have more energy than anyone in the world.”

He grunts. “No kidding. I can’t believe Mursha is still going.”

I smile softly. “Hopefully that means she’ll sleep well tonight.”

“Don’t count on it.”

I laugh at that. Sweat drips from my brow, and I quickly dab at it. “You know, in hindsight, I really should have brought some water bottles with us.”

Not missing a beat, Drek pulls out the bag he brought with us and grabs a water bottle from inside. He hands it to me. “Luckily, I happen to excel at foresight.”

If I wasn’t so stinky and sweaty, I could have kissed him. Instead, I take the water bottle gratefully and gulp it down.

Drek might be a little pragmatic, sometimes to an irritating degree, but there are times when it’s lifesaving. He’s a good balance for all my chaos and diving headfirst into things. When push comes to shove, having Drek by my side really makes my wild dreams realistic.

He takes out another water bottle for himself and drinks deeply. Our eyes meet, and for a while, we just stare at one another.

Something inside me seems to fall into place. Like I know with absolute certainty that I’m right where I’m meant to be. With *who* I’m meant to be with.

The thought terrifies me for a moment before it settles into something like contentment. There’s something so nice about just knowing where you belong.

DREK

“So, do I get to know now where we’re going or am I going to be blindfolded the whole outing?” Abby asks playfully. Currently, Abby, Mursha, and I are all sitting in the back of the limousine I’ve rented for the night and are heading towards our destination.

Just half an hour ago, we surprised Abby while she was cleaning up by telling her that we were going on an outing right that second. She’d protested, of course, saying that her hair was a mess and she was only in a T-shirt and old jeans. She’d protested even more when she saw we were getting in a limo and said she really wasn’t dressed for the occasion. Mursha and I had reassured her that she would be dressed perfectly.

And then we blindfolded her.

This had been Mursha’s idea, and it was turning out to be a rather amusing one at that.

“Not yet,” I tell her. Abby huffs.

Beside me, Mursha is practically bouncing in her seat. I’d debated over and over again whether or not it was a good idea to tell Mursha about tonight’s activity. But I realized I needed to tell her since it involved her, too. I just hope she can keep the secret.

I put a finger to my lips to remind her of her promise not to spill the beans. Mursha settles down a bit and nods, but the wide grin on her face remains.

Frankly, half the reason I want Abby to keep the blindfold on is so she can't see our expressions. Mursha's giddiness can be explained by the exciting outing we're going on. But I'm afraid of what she might discern from my face. I really want this to be a surprise. A good surprise. I hope she thinks this is a good surprise.

Finally, we arrive at our destination. Or at least, very near it.

We step out of the limo, guiding Abby out the door. Then I undo the blindfold.

Abby blinks a little, adjusting to the light. When she sees what's before us, she gasps. "Is that... is that where we're going?"

I smile. "That's where we're going."

In front of us just in the water is a yacht waiting for us.

Abby shakes her head as if trying to clear her confusion. "Wait, so, what exactly are we doing?"

I shrug. "I just thought it would be a nice place to have dinner," I say casually, glad when my voice doesn't betray anything.

Glancing quickly at Mursha, I see that she's doing a pretty good job of keeping a straight face. I'll have to remember to congratulate her later on her self-restraint.

Abby looks even more confused. "Is it some sort of floating restaurant or something?"

I chuckle. "Actually, I own it. And since I own it, I thought, why not use it? So tonight, I decided we might as well dine here."

I offer her my arm. She still looks wary, but she takes my arm, anyway. Mursha takes her free hand, and together, we lead Abby onto the yacht.

When we reach the deck, Abby sucks in a sharp breath, and I almost take one in with her. I know exactly what it's supposed to look like. I did most of the planning after all, but still, seeing it here is incredible.

Beautiful lights have been strung everywhere and immaculately arranged flowers line the edge of the deck.

“Oh, I am really underdressed,” Abby murmurs.

A smile tugs at my lips. “Well, if you feel that way, then you’ll probably like the next surprise we have for you.”

Her head snaps to meet my gaze. “There are more surprises?”

My smile grows wider. “I think, my dear, you’ll find that there will be a lot of surprises tonight. Come, let us show you what we have for you.”

And with that, we lead her to a table in the center of the deck. On the table are three boxes lined up together. I nod to Mursha, who steps up eagerly.

“Okay, now pick one!” she tells Abby. “You’re going to get them all anyway, but pick which one you want first.”

Abby chuckles softly. “Alright, in that case, I pick... this one!”

She points to the box on the left. Mursha takes the chosen box and hands it to Abby, who takes it gently. She opens the box and laughs as she pulls out a pair of heels.

“Oh, these are super cute! Now I can have great shoes to go with my grunge look,” she quips.

“I think you ought to pick another box,” I tell her.

She studies the two boxes and then points to the one on the right. “How about that one?”

I take Abby’s first gift from her as she opens her next present. She gasps when she opens this one. “Oh Drek, these are real. This is – I mean, I can’t accept –”

“Of course you can,” I say.

Held delicately in her fingers is a diamond necklace. And I know the matching bracelet is right next to it.

“Are you ready to open your last gift?” I ask her.

She laughs a little breathlessly and shakes her head. “I’m not sure how much more I can handle. This is already so incredible and so kind.”

“It is everything you deserve and more,” I murmur.

Her cheeks turn red, and I gently take the box from her and then nod at Mursha. She grabs the last box from the table.

Abby takes it and opens it. She grins. “So that’s why you didn’t care if I was dressed up or not.”

Inside the box is a light green dress to go with the shoes and the jewelry.

I nod to the captain’s cabin. “You can go change in the cabin up those stairs. Mursha can go help you.”

Her grin widens as she and Mursha take the boxes from me, then head up the stairs and into the cabin.

I wait for a heartbeat after she’s gone in before I make the signal for the workers to come out of where they’ve been hiding. Together, quickly but quietly, we start putting everything into place.

At my side, the walkie-talkie I’ve been hiding clicks once. Mursha has the other walkie-talkie, and we came up with some signals for the night.

One click means they’re almost ready. Two clicks means she’s stalling Abby. Three clicks means Abby is about to walk out of the cabin.

We speed up our process a bit.

The walkie-talkie clicks twice. Mursha is stalling Abby from walking out. We don’t have much time left.

The workers put on the finishing touches as I signal the orchestra to come out.

Three clicks.

I rush to my position at the bottom of the stairs. Everyone and everything is in place.

Abby opens the door and freezes. I can't keep the smile off my face.

The stairs have been scattered with rose petals and candles line the edges. The table has been replaced by a grander one and set up for an extravagant dinner.

And then, of course, there's the orchestra. As soon as they see Abby, they begin to play. The music is sweeping and grand and makes the whole thing come alive.

Abby's mouth is agape, and she looks as if she's not sure she's in the right place. She looks utterly gorgeous now wearing her gifts. Full credit for that has to go to Mursha, who picked out the dress and heels.

I hold out my hand for Abby, and slowly she starts walking towards me, looking like she's in a daze. I guide her to the table where we all sit down.

"Drek," she murmurs. "This is incredible."

I squeeze her hand. "Believe me, the night's only just begun."

And so we eat our grand meal and fancy desserts. Mursha got to pick some of her favorite foods to be put on the menu, as well, so she stays occupied enjoying the food and music. By the time we finish, the sun has started to set.

I stand from the table and hold out my hand to Abby. "Would you dance with me?"

She grins and nods. I lead her away from the table and we sway to the music.

As we dance, I take in her flushed expression and the utter happiness on her face.

"Abby," I start. "You have completely and utterly changed my world. A year ago I would have resented that fact, dreaded it. But now I couldn't be more grateful."

I swallow hard as I continue. "In the time that you've come into our lives, I've become a better orc and a better father because of you. Not because you made me, but because you inspired me to be."

“The most incredible people in the world are the ones who see the problems in it and make changes. You are most certainly one of those incredible people. And I am so very honored that you chose to bring light and laughter into our lives.”

I spin her around once and then break away from her, taking a step back. She gives me a puzzled look.

I drop to one knee. Then I pull out a ring from my pocket.

“Abby Mallet, there is no one else I’d rather have as my life-long partner than you. Will you marry me?”

She covers her mouth with her hands. A small, startled laugh escapes her and she smiles broadly as tears gather in the corner of her eyes.

“Yes, yes, I’ll marry you!”

I put the ring on her finger and then scoop her up into my arms and kiss her. She kisses me back just as passionately, almost hanging on for dear life.

Then fireworks go off, real fireworks, and we pull away to watch the display.

Mursha squeals and nearly tackles Abby in a hug. Abby laughs. “So does this mean you’re okay with me becoming your new mom?”

Mursha nods. “Yep! Daddy asked for my blessing earlier.”

Abby strokes her hair and then pulls her back into a hug. We all stand there, holding each other and watching the fireworks.

Our little family.

ABBY

I dance with Drek until the moon is high in the night sky and the orchestra retires for the evening. The yacht docks at the marina, but I'm just not ready to get off yet. My life literally just changed here mere hours ago. It feels like there's something else left, something that needs to happen to make this all feel complete.

My face turns red as I realize precisely what it is my heart is craving. My hands fidget together as the skilled musicians who truly made this night special load out. Drek hands a very large wad of cash to the conductor, tells him to keep the change, and turns back to me with a wink.

"Drek..." I start, but he comes up and lays a finger on my lips.

"We're not done yet, don't worry." Drek walks to the table where we had dinner and lifts the ivory white linen cloth. Underneath is a gently snoring Mursha. It is far past her bedtime. Drek scoops her up in his arms and walks again to the plank.

Waiting near the parking area is a woman I vaguely recognize in the dark as one of his housekeepers. He must have paid her extra to be a sitter for tonight. Drek hands her Mursha, still fast asleep, and I hear him thanking her for agreeing to watch her all night.

The woman nods and takes the girl to her car. Drek turns and comes back to me, taking my hands in his.

“Now,” he purrs, getting his close down next to mine. “Where were we?”

I breathe a sigh of relief as I realize Drek really did think of everything. From bringing me beautiful clothing to planning on removing it as well.

“We were dancing,” I say casually. I place my hands again on his shoulders and simply start to sway. There’s no music except the gentle crashing of the waves. Even the sea birds are silently fast asleep.

“That we were,” Drek replies. He goes along with it, placing his hand on the small of my back and moving me in time with the sound of the tide. We dance across the yacht until we’re at the bow.

I feel so relaxed, at ease with my life and how I got here. I never imagined when I agreed to temporarily nanny one of my players, I’d end up on a luxury yacht engaged with a rich, handsome orc.

Yet here I am.

Drek moves his hand a little lower and I smile, blushing hard. He grips my ass and I let out a small giggle. I push myself up on my toes and kiss him. I’ve become so accustomed to his taste and the feel of his lips on mine. I can’t imagine ever going without from now on.

I hear the sound of a zipper and realize what’s happening. I’m half-flustered at how exposed I am out here, even though we’re the only two people in sight. It’s exciting though, and I only shiver a little when he rolls the straps of my dress off my shoulders. The bodice comes down too, and my naked breasts greet the cold night air.

Drek grips my ass even tighter as he cups his mouth around one of my tits. I groan at the warmth contrasting with the chill. It feels delightful. He sucks and nips at me before moving to the other side. I stroke his hair and urge him on with tiny gasps and moans.

Then, right when I’m completely losing myself to him, I feel one of his large fingers dip between my thighs and start

rubbing my clit over my panties.

“Drek!” I gasp out. He stands back up, leaving my nipples hard and aching, and takes me back in for another kiss. He darts his tongue into my mouth, and I greet him with my own. Drek rubs around my clit, teasing over and under the fabric of my panties and making me soaked. He pulls his mouth away from me and smiles down at my flushed face.

“Lean against the handrail,” he states. I do so. Drek gets on his knees and lifts my skirt up. My entire dress is now sitting around my waist, and I idly hope the pretty thing isn’t ruined. That thought only lasts until I feel that chill night air hit my pussy, and I find myself no longer able to care about much of anything else.

Drek warms me with his tongue. He laps at my slit and takes his time to play around my clit. He darts the tip into my opening and runs it across my folds. I’m getting so worked up now, I almost forget if I lean too far back I might end up in the ocean!

I hold onto the handrail and push back against Drek’s face. I can almost feel him smile against me. I know he loves it when I beg for more without uttering a single word.

He grasps my ass with both hands and digs in as deep as possible. The cold air, the metal rail, his warm tongue, and the gentle movement of the boat under my feet are all coming together to make me dizzy with sensation. Drek knows I’m close, he’s gotten so good at finding my sweet spot.

And it’s there that he releases his grip on me and slides one finger into my pussy. I throw my head back and cry out as my muscles contract into a strong, all-consuming orgasm. I tremble against the railing, grateful for its support as I let myself get lost in each wave of pleasure.

Finally, as I catch my breath, Drek pulls away and stands back up. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and smiles.

“Satisfied?” he asks.

I shake my head. He knows I won't be until I have his cock in me. Drek's smile turns into a smirk as he helps me step out of my dress and panties. He rolls them up and places them on the floor of the ship where he next lays me down.

I rest my head on the dress like a pillow and sigh at the beautiful stars above me. Drek towers over me and I get to watch, with my lip squarely between my teeth, as he slowly undresses for me. His ripped pecs and hard, thick cock are exposed just for me. All with the dazzling night sky as his backdrop.

Drek gets back down on his knees and spreads my legs, hooking them over his hips. He leans down and kisses me again, this time slower. Just languishing the taste of each other. There's no need to rush anything. We've got all the time in the world.

When I'm finally at the peak of my arousal and absolutely burning for Drek, I reach down between us and grab his cock. I stroke it, feeling a bead of pre-cum forming at the tip. Drek groans and the deep vibrations run through my entire body.

"I want you, Abby," he whispers in my ear.

"I'm all yours."

I help him position at my opening and pull away just as Drek pushes in. My mouth falls open and I let out a strangled gasp. I don't know if I'll ever get used to just how much he stretches me open.

God, I hope I never do.

Drek lays down on me and cradles my head in his hands as his hips begin to move. He slowly pushes in and pulls back out even slower. He loves teasing me like this, watching me gasp and whine and buckle into him. I'm a fan of it, as well.

"Please," I beg, exactly how he likes it. "Faster!"

"Again," Drek demands. "Beg me more."

"Drek, please, oh my God! I need your cock. I need you to fuck me harder, faster!"

Drek simply chuckles and rubs his thumb across my burning cheek. “Anything for my bride-to-be,” he whispers. And with that, he gives me what I want in one hard, sudden push. I gasp in delight as I’m wrenched backward, my head pushed off the dress cushion. Drek pushes himself up on his hands and starts pumping into me, hard and fast, just like I asked for.

My breasts bounce in the night air, keeping time with my frenzied breaths. I love this. I love how we can be so loving and intimate yet so ready to give into our baser needs.

It never feels wrong with Drek. He never pushes me too hard. I’m safe, and happy, and getting very well fucked.

I raise my hands to grip his biceps, squeezing as he continues to fuck me hard. I smile and hold on for the best ride of my life.

“You feel good, Abby?” he asks.

“So good,” I sigh. “I’m close again!”

Drek’s eyes sparkle with delight, even brighter than the stars behind him. I know how much he likes to be reminded of his prowess. He drops to his elbows and grips the back of my head, pulling me in for one more long, deep kiss. I nip at his bottom lip and greet his tongue with my own as I feel the pressure becoming unbearable.

“Come with me,” I beg. “Please, Drek, come with me.”

His thrusts become faster and faster until I finally explode, screaming and moaning into his mouth. Drek groans again, and after a few shallow thrusts, he slowly comes to a stop.

Drek collapses at my side and pulls me in. We lay there together, our breathing slowly coming back to normal. The boat sways gently underneath us. I could really fall asleep right here.

I look up at Drek to find him already gazing down at me.

“Mrs. Ogrun,” he says with a warm smile.

“Hmm. I could get used to that.”

DREK

“Daddy! Watch me dance!” Ria squeals, just as Abby rounds the corner with Mursha.

“Someone wants to say hello, I guess,” Abby explains, even though Navin is well aware of his daughter’s tendency to be sneaky. For an orc, even a young one, she’s extremely light-footed.

“We’re playing Rob the Castle,” Ria explains, holding one of my grandmother’s priceless Faberge eggs in her gloved hand.

“Are those my mother’s lace gloves?” I don’t know why I make this statement sound like a question. I could spot the Alencon lace gloves from down the block on the little one.

“They’re the perfect gloves for robbing the castle,” my crimson-clothed daughter explains. So they both went into the attic and through the family wardrobes...

“And it goes with the theme of the game,” Ria states. “Because we’re robbing you.”

I get the sense this seven-year-old is smarter than I was at the same age. I don’t like it and flick my eyes at Abby, who does nothing but shrug and look a little sorry.

“You said the play clothes were upstairs,” Abby says, smiling once she sees what me and the other dads are doing. “College football?” She looks at us like they’re the ones having more fun than we are.

“There’s a lot of money riding on this game,” another dad says.

“Good,” Abby replies, gesturing to the two orc girls now running and screaming out of the game room. “You’ll need a big payoff to make up for what these bandits grab. They’ve decided they are circus performers who free exotic animals from their rich patrons at night.”

“Grandmother’s eggs aren’t exotic animals.” I have half a mind to go after the girls and let them know this. But then again, the commercials are almost over.

“Not until they hatch they’re not,” my wife-to-be explains as she exits after the younglings.

I can’t believe it’s only a few days until the wedding. The last two months have flown by and in the best way possible. A private island wedding is what we’ve settled on, which took almost no convincing on my part when suggesting the idea to Abby. She loved it, almost as much as I love her.

I’ve had the island for several years now and thought I’d use it more for vacationing. Wishful thinking up to this point, since I never take enough time off work.

Until now, I think as I catch Abby winking my way. I’m about to smile, then remember the glove situation. My brow furrows instead, and I can’t help myself.

“She’s going to give those gloves back, right?” I ask Navin, who graces me with a quick look before darting his eyes back to the TV.

“Not if she’s any good at robbing,” he quips, and I roll my eyes, then heave a deep sigh that I hope the girls hear down the hall. *Or wherever they are at this point.*

“Enjoy your bachelor party, because by this time next week—”

“You’ll be mine,” I finish and share a knowing look with my fellow orcs.

“I was going to say penniless because I like where this conversation is going and want to worry you. Good night, my

love.” She beams as the guys smirk and snort their approval.

“Hang onto that one,” Navin says as soon as Abby exits.

“Mind your own business, Nav,” Gar, the fatherless one of the bunch, suggests, and I nod my approval at him. “If Drek wants to fuck it up, that’s for him to regret. Right, buddy?”

I’m already watching the screen again. Though we don’t get together often because our busy schedules keep us occupied, I don’t miss the ribbing. At least not much. It’s different when Abby does it.

“None of you are attractive enough to talk this way to me in my own home.” I turn the volume up as the guys shoot their lame comebacks.

Once the game is over and the Mediterranean smorgasbord Abby had catered finally arrives, we shoot a few rounds of pool and feast. Nobody gets tired of making bets for each shot, even when they lose three times in a row like Navin.

“It’s probably Drek’s Grandma cursing you for taking her gloves,” Gar jokes just as I make a corner pocket shot. We’ve changed the rules up a bit and are only making single shots. Too busy cleaning his second plate, Todrick sits this one out, making it an odd number.

“Your logic is garbage, and it always has been.” Navin’s flat tone belies his humor. “I didn’t take anything.”

He sets up his shot but misses again. Just like last time. The striped ball bounces off the corner and spins far off course down the opposite side of the pool table.

“Stupid fuck...” I have to hide my smirk when Navin’s voice trails off. He likes to win, and everyone knows it. But since I do too – and it’s my house, my rules – I sigh and look up at the ceiling.

“Mother, actually,” I correct flatly, hoping Navin is thrown off by my tone. He’s known me long enough to grasp the fact I’m not much of a kidder. Can I manage to yank his chain a little? “But it is odd you say that, Gar.”

“No, it’s not. He’s an odd orc who says odd shit all the time,” Navin comments.

“Says you,” Gar claps back.

“Says everyone.”

“Name one odd thing I’ve said.” I try not to notice Gar’s lager sloshing out of his mug as he gestures with his hand.

Abby keeps reminding me I have maids for a reason. There’s no need to point out his clumsiness at a bachelor party. The two words, after all, have nearly the same meaning – isn’t clumsiness almost baked into the definition of a bachelor party? I could have much worse liquids on my game room carpet. Much, much worse.

Carpet isn’t supposed to last forever, I remind myself. And it works since it’s Abby’s voice I’m hearing.

“Bringing ghosts into a perfect reasonable exchange,” Navin answers, referring to the current conversation.

“Fine, name ten,” Gar snaps back, landing his shot with expert care.

“She only ever used those particular ones when she was summoning. That’s all.” I say this to Todrick, hoping the other two will overhear. I can’t appear too eager to get everyone’s attention. It’s something I’ve learned from Abby when it comes to pranks.

“Summoning?” Navin’s voice is all contempt.

“Yeah, isn’t that what it’s called?” I do my best to look mildly confused. “When people try calling up the dead?”

“Ha! Navin’s fucking haunted,” Gar kids, laughing along with Todrick.

“You’re full of shit,” Navin scoffs and takes another sip of his bourbon.

“I’m not saying I believe in that garbage,” I suggest. “I’m just telling you that she did.” I sip my wine slowly and furrow my brow. If I’m lucky, someone will help me out and ask me what I’m thinking about.

“What?” Todrick gestures toward me as I take my shot.

“I’m just wondering what else was up there the girls went through.” The ball drops into the middle pocket with a satisfying clunk. “She acquired a lot of... weird things in her time.”

“Too bad you’re full of shit.” Navin manages to shoot a ball off the table.

It falls to the carpet as the rest of us look at each other. We’ve been drinking enough not to let this go, and there’s nothing more satisfying to a group of orcs than prodding one another’s vulnerabilities. It’s what makes us such quality companions. Friends help friends toughen up.

“Just make sure Ria gives them back in the morning, and you should have nothing to worry about,” I tell him.

“I don’t have anything to worry about now.” He picks up the ball as Todrick and Gar smirk in his direction. Todrick crosses his chest in the manner of a blessing, and I turn away before anyone can see my smirk.

After three more missed shots, which Navin correctly blames on our bullying and not some imaginary curse, we’re all tipsy enough to take a midnight swim.

I’m glad my mansion has an indoor pool and equally happy to see drinks, snacks, and a pile of towels on a table near the water. Abby didn’t tell me she’d set up a poker table poolside. It’s just another surprise and one more reason to love her.

“You think Navin’s too scared to get in because he’s failing so hard tonight?” Gar asks as soon as he breaches the surface of the water.

“I think Navin overate, and Gar should touch the bottom and never come back up,” Navin suggests, sprawled across a lounge chair and patting his belly.

“Do you hear that, Tod?” Gar tilts his head, and I chuckle as Navin shakes his in contempt. “I think Navin’s feelings are hurt.”

“I don’t have feelings, I – ah!” The end of Navin’s comment is said through a mouthful of fondue. And most likely hot fondue, judging by his bulging brown eyes.

“It’s the curse,” Gar kids in a sinister voice. “That cheese hasn’t been heated up in twenty-five years! Ooooh!”

I laugh and wonder how much Gar’s had to drink. Also, where and what the girls are doing. Are Abby and the younglings still up? What else have Mursha and Ria gotten into at this point?

“You really are a boy trapped in a grown orc’s body. You know that, right?” Navin pops another piece of steaming, cheese-covered bread into his mouth without blowing on it. I can see his watery eyes from here and don’t envy him. The roof of his mouth must be in tatters on his tongue by now.

“At least I’m not cursed,” Gar shoots back, and Navin flicks a piece of hot food in Gar’s direction. The swimming orc almost catches it, but the morsel smacks against his cheek before plopping into the water.

“See,” he says. “Cursed. You used to be able to aim better.”

Even Navin’s laughing at this, and it isn’t long before we’re all deep in a poker game. I win a few hands and blame my luck on Abby. Our wedding day can’t come soon enough.

ABBY

I pick off another piece of invisible lint from my dress as my parents continue regaling Mursha with childhood stories of me. I smirk at my mother through the mirror as the photographer snaps yet another picture while I nervously fiddle with a design on my medium-length veil. Though I had to work to get the piece to work well with the rest of my wardrobe, it was worth the headache in the end. I can't wait for Drek to lift it back after our vows.

My gown is light but elaborate, handmade and clinging to my curves. The back hangs open, matching the split sleeves that cling to my shoulders and wrists. I feel like a goddess rather than a princess and wonder what I did to deserve such opulence.

The bridal suite for our island wedding — a small but gorgeous bungalow on Drek's personal and very tropical paradise — is nothing compared to the estate we'll be staying at during our long honeymoon for three here. Well, five.

When I'd asked my husband-to-be how many places were on the island, he'd shrugged and told me it was a good question.

"I've had this place for a long time."

"Wow. Rich People problems," I teased.

"Might be something fun for Mursha and your parents to experience." His shrug had me just as confused as his statement when he'd initially broached the subject.

“What? Rich people problems?” Surely that’s not what he meant.

“No, how many little shanties and bungalows I have on the property. I honestly lost track.”

“Musical homes? Please tell me you have a giant music system to play the necessary circus music on.”

“I haven’t settled on the exact system I want.”

“Another rich person problem.”

“Mommy, look at what Grandpa gave me!” Mursha says, pulling me out of my revelry just in time to look directly into the camera.

“Oh this one’s gonna be cute,” Susan, the photographer, says before navigating to the picture on her digital camera.

The hairstylist adjusts a wayward curl from my flower crown as Susan’s face falls, then scrunches up. It’s the international expression for ‘I was wrong.’

“Oh...” Susan’s voice trails off. “Best two out of three.”

“Cheese!” Mursha hollers, and I know right away the pictures of us are going to be cute — for her. I go with it eventually and smile.

“Oh, this one of you two is going to be frame-worthy!” Again, she checks her camera. “Oh...”

I smile and beg to see the picture. “I love it!” I admit playfully. The two of us look ridiculous, and all my jumping sent another lock of curl falling into my mouth.

“This goes in the foyer back home,” Mursha states.

“In your room, tucked inside a very special picture album,” I counter, hoping Mursha is feeling gracious. “Full of things you’re sure to find on your mommy moon,” I add when she doesn’t answer right away. Mommy moon is what Mursha’s named her own special honeymoon.

Susan looks relieved that I’m taking the pictures and my hair in stride. And I am. At least when it comes to other

people. On the inside, I'm a swirling vortex of emotion. But in a good way.

"Look!" Mursha says as the stylist once again adjusts my hair.

My daughter shows me an origami frog made from a spanking new two-dollar bill, my dad's go-to icebreaker. He's been steadily adding to her collection since he and my mother landed for their extended visit.

"That is the nicest origami two-dollar bill since the last one you got."

I wink at Dad, who winks back before adjusting his glasses. I remember my origami collection, except back then, they were strips of paper. *Oh, to be an adopted granddaughter*, I think as a knock on the front door grabs all our attention.

"It's him!" Mursha hollers, and I can't help but smile.

"No, doll. Your dad's waiting for us down the aisle."

"That's your ride, kid," Dad says to Mursha.

"Gerald, she has a name," Mom teases, walking over to the door.

A dapper gentleman with a tophat and the curliest mustache possible waits at the door, and I finally get to see what's taking us across the small island to the elaborate boho ceremony. It took more than a little arm twisting to talk Drek into incorporating wooden flowers and wicker into the decor.

This includes the octagonal wedding arch, which Drek demanded be handmade by an artist of his choosing though based on my designs. It wasn't the biggest compromise to make, and honestly, I look forward to making more. Drek's surprisingly good at compromise. At least more of the time, now that I'm around.

"Close your eyes!" Mom hollers as a pair of hands hover over my eyes. The scent of lavender hits me. I know my mother's behind me.

"Okay, they're closed," I say, a smile on my face.

I'm giddy to see what exactly we'll be taking since Dad decided not to walk me down the aisle and instead surprise me.

"Should we count down?" I hear Mom ask. "Or –"

"It's a horse!" I feel Mursha bolt past me to pet the impressive animal, its color as white as snow.

"No, honey, that's for Abby," Mom says to Mursha, gently clutching both my daughter's shoulders. She's careful not to disturb the flowers woven into the young orc's hair. Mom leans in and whispers something to her, before pointing to the jet-black loaded golf cart parked in front of the horse.

"Okay!" Mursha says, bounding down the steps and into the golf cart. "Mom! Let's go. We're missing your wedding!"

"What did you promise her?" I ask.

"Yeah, Sarah, what did *you* bribe her with?" It's Dad's turn to tease.

"I said she could stand in the golf cart if she wants while we drive." Mom looks proud, no doubt eager to be the fun grandmother who contrasts her granddaughter's overbearing parents.

"Famous last words," I say, letting the horse handler help me down the steps. "Oh, wow! This is great," I admit, smiling back at Dad. "Wish me luck getting down."

"You look beautiful, dear!" Mom yells as I settle on the horse, the photographer still snapping away.

My heart is starting to race, and the sun's penetrating rays are blinding my vision. I take a deep breath and close my eyes, rather than rage like some bridezilla. Not every picture is going to look good.

"Ladies first," I say, gesturing to the golf cart.

The ceremony is perfect, and it isn't long before I'm dancing with my new husband as the myriad revelers around us do the same. Mursha ate more cake than she should have, goaded on by my father, and is now crashing at the head table overlooking the ocean.

Drek squeezes my hand, then gestures to our droopy-eyed daughter.

“You think she’s going to make it to her bed on her own?” he asks.

“Do pigs fly?” I respond, leaning my head against his broad chest.

“Not even if you throw them high enough,” he admits after pecking me in the forehead.

I tickle the back of his neck with a few manicured nails, proud of the joke my serious husband just made. “Challenge accepted,” I reply.

“Should I add flying pigs to the bucket list?” he asks playfully. “Since we’ll have our whole life to cross every item off. I figure we’ll do all the normal stuff in the first few years.”

“You are on fire.” I chuckle.

“Your dad is contagious,” he replies. “Now I see why you’re so silly.”

We both watch Dad grab a flower from one of the centerpieces and then tickle Mursha’s ear with it until the girl wakes up. The little orc jolts awake, then frowns over at her grandpa, her eyes narrowing into slits. Without looking away from him, Mursha grabs a flower of her own and fights back, tickling Dad square in the jaw. He feigns injury, falling back into my mother’s arms and spilling a little of her champagne on his forehead.

“Yeah, she’ll definitely be fine with them,” Drek says.

“It’s not like we aren’t a golf cart ride away,” I remind him. “Give her two days with them, and she’ll never want to see us again.”

“That would be... wounding,” Drek eventually replies.

I squeeze his hand before replying. “Not being literal, dear.” I frown, remembering chocolate-peanut butter French toast Saturdays.

At least once a month as a kid, Mom and Dad would surprise me with a sugary feast for breakfast. I can't imagine what they'll serve a grandkid and part of me is a little envious. "Actually, maybe worry a little."

I brush my lips across his as the song changes to something even slower. I close my eyes and let the rolling waves in the distance slip into the melody.

"I still have the trampoline park up my sleeve," he says. "You didn't tell them about the trampoline park, did you?"

My husband's voice sounds more concerned than it should. I decide to play with him since I'm his wife and allowed to. In fact, it may even be my job to keep him humble.

"Umm..." I pull back and force my face to contort in something close to confusion. "I know I didn't tell Mom, but I think Dad's the one who told me about it," I lie.

"I should tell him that's my place to take Mursha before we leave. It's —"

I pull his arm back as he tries to leave the dance floor. Now that Drek's found his playful side – and a place that can accommodate his size – maybe it's cruel to tease him for enjoying something I had a hand in supporting.

"I kid, husband. I kid," I confess, and he returns to slow dancing with me.

"Never joke about trampolines," he warns, and I tell him I can't make any promises.

DREK

I close the door and smile at the sound of my wife's laughter. She collapses on the California King-size bed, face blushing red and eyes scrunched closed as her fit of giggles continues. I simply shake my head and walk over, removing her sandals and setting them aside.

"I can't, oh my gosh, I cannot believe she..." Abby rolls onto her side, hands on her mouth as she continues to laugh. My darling bride has had one too many mai tais, it seems, and now finds even the worst kid jokes to be the funniest thing that's ever happened to her.

I lean over her on the mattress and brush her soft hair out of her face. A few strands stick near her eyes, where tears of laughter are starting to form.

"She's so funny. My daughter is so funny!" Abby cries. She smiles wide and stares up at me with a dreamy expression. "My daughter."

"Our daughter," I say with a nod. Abby grabs my hand and holds it to her cheek. She sighs, possibly taking herself back to our first night together. That's certainly where my mind has gone. I stroke her pink cheek, still warm from the sun.

We spent the better part of the day on the beach. Mursha had quite the time swimming and playing. I was even reserved enough not to critique the stability of her sandcastle. Thanks to Abby, I was able to see Mursha's creation for what it was. An act of creativity, not a foray into real architecture requiring critique.

Abby lounged in the most comfortable beach chair money could buy. She had a stack of paperback books, snacks, and all the tropical drinks her heart desired at the press of a button.

My staff were fantastic. I'll have to give them a raise.

Her parents spent the day touring my private island. I had the best guide possible show them everything and make sure they were plenty busy all day. Not that I don't appreciate my new in-laws, but today was just for us. Plus, they had so much fun and excitement that they went straight to their room afterward.

So now, as Mursha naps in her room and dinner is still being prepared, it's just me and Abby. And our enormous bed in our very private room.

I take her hand in mine and kiss her knuckles. I can see the desire flashing in her eyes. And if the covers of the books she read today are any indication, she's already very worked up.

"What would you like to do?" I ask slyly, already knowing the answer.

"Hmm, I've had such a wonderful time since the moment we got here. And today was so perfectly relaxing, all because of you. I want to do something for you." Abby sits up and pokes me on the nose. "Why don't you take those cargo shorts off and lay back on the bed for me?"

Well, that was unexpected. I do as I'm asked, fully undressing, and lay back on the bed with my hands behind my head. I smile as my beautiful bride takes off her cover dress but leaves on that incredible bikini. It's fitted just right to really make her breasts perk up, and the way the tie-offs on the sides show off her hips drives me crazy.

I'm already hard before Abby even touches me. She crawls up to me from the foot of the bed and pushes her tits against my erection. The warmth makes me groan, and I relax even more into the pillows.

Abby balances herself on her knees and takes my cock in one hand, cradling my balls in the other. She starts to stroke and sighs in delight as I fully harden in her grasp.

“Fuck, Drek,” she says breathily. “I swear, every time, you somehow get bigger.”

I chuckle at her compliment. She strokes my ego just as expertly as she strokes my cock. Speaking of, Abby starts taking it further. She bends down and wraps her lips around the tip. Her ass is in the air, on full display for me. Her bikini bottom is slightly out of place, riding up her ass like a thong. The sight is threatening to make this moment end very abruptly.

But I calm myself back down. I want to enjoy Abby’s hard work as long as possible. She pushes her mouth down my length, swallowing as much of me as she can until her lips hit the one hand wrapped around the base.

She’s gotten so good at swallowing my cock. I reach one hand down and stroke her hair, letting her know how good she’s doing. Abby smiles in response and starts bobbing her head. I groan, urging her on. The suction she’s creating with her mouth is good. Hell, it’s amazing, but it always makes me want more.

“I want to be inside you,” I grunt as she grips me tighter. “Wanna fuck your pussy.”

Abby slowly releases my cock from her mouth, sits up, and smiles.

“You’re so crass,” she says with a laugh.

My response is to crook my finger, summoning her towards me. Abby obeys and crawls over my body until her face is hovering over mine. She leans down and kisses me, making cute little sounds in her throat as we make out.

I grip her hips with my hands and slowly undo the ties. She lifts herself so I can slide it away and replace the fabric with my fingers.

“Oh, Drek...” she sighs. Abby is soaking wet, and I easily slip one finger into her pussy. I rub her clit with my thumb and delight in the sounds she makes. Then, I use my free hand to coax her back down and continue our little makeout session.

Abby hums and cries in small gasps as I work her over. She grinds against my hand, shamelessly chasing her own pleasure now.

I wouldn't have it any other way.

"Ready?" I ask. Abby nods quickly. I remove my hand and grip my cock. It slides into Abby's pussy with ease. She leans back, hands on my chest for support, and I watch as her eyes roll to the ceiling.

I place my hands back on her hips and slowly ease her all the way down. But Abby takes my hands and removes them.

"Back behind your head," she demands. "You're still supposed to relax."

I do as I'm told with a happy smile on my face. Abby rides me so well. I let her move on my cock, watching her tits bounce as she quickens and slows her pace to her own whims. I only contribute now and then, jerking my hips up to send her a deep surprise. She moans so deeply every time I do.

Finally, as beads of sweat roll down her breasts and my cock feels ready to explode, I disobey her order and place my hand back on her clit.

"Cum for me," I say, rubbing her in smooth, hard circles. "Cum for me, Abby."

Abby grips my shoulders, bucks against my hand, and pivots her back just right so that as soon as her body begins to clench around me, I'm right there with her. I cum hard, hearing my wife scream in ecstasy as I continue thrusting as long as I can.

My breathing slows, her mouth slowly closes, and we collapse together on the bed. The cool island breeze trails in through the balcony window, licking at our sun-kissed and sweaty skin.

Abby sighs as the exertion and rum continue to keep her relaxed and boneless. And I know exactly how to keep that feeling going. I stretch and stand and make my way to the master bathroom to make sure my staff did exactly as I asked. When Abby said she was ready to head in a while ago, I paged

them to have the whirlpool tub filled and heated, with aromatic oils to create a spa feel. There are also rose petals scattered and candles lit.

Smiling at their attention to detail — they're getting huge bonuses this holiday, too — I walk back to the bed to collect my wife. She sighs dreamily as I pick her up.

“What now?” she asks. “We can't be too long or we'll have to make an excuse for being late to dinner.”

I shake my head. “Keep that thought for after dessert. But,” I say, nudging the door open and revealing her post-coitus surprise. Again, Abby sighs like she's in a fantasy. I carefully lower her into the bubbling, steamy water and watch her melt into the corner.

There's some sparkling wine on the counter I hadn't noticed before. A perfect aperitif. I pour two glasses and join Abby in the tub.

“What's for dinner tonight?” Abby asks before taking a long sip from her flute.

“Island spiced roast pork, sweet rolls, mashed taro, and the chef's choice of vegetable. And spaghetti, for Mursha.” I grin as I recount the menu I personally crafted for the honeymoon. Once I heard her in-laws were staying, I knew I needed to pull out the stops to really impress them.

Abby leans her head back, eyes gently closed, and hums in satisfaction. “And dessert?”

I smirk. This is where I really wow her. “Chocolate macadamia coconut cream pie with fresh berries and French vanilla whipped cream. Oh, and a scoop of fresh mango gelato.”

Abby groans and sinks into the bath. “I think I might've just had another orgasm. How am I supposed to leave this place?”

I chuckle. “We can return whenever you wish.”

She smiles wide and swims to my side, settling her head on my shoulder. “But what if I never want to leave in the first

place?” she asks.

“Well, whatever you want is yours, Abby.”

And in my heart, I know that’s completely true.

The End

To read more about Abby and Drek join my newsletter at:

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