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## Chapter 20

When she was done typing whatever, his expressionless exterior came back up. "Traffic Cone said you were meeting Valor for lunch."

"Your Grace," she began between mouthfuls of the second bagel, hand held up and index finger raising to make a point. "When you put it that way, it sounds like I was having a meal and a good chat with my boss."

"I take it that it didn't go well?" He tried to sound monotonous, but concern slither into his voice and snuck into their conversation.

Sush didn't see the significance, figuring he could be as tolerable and respectable as the queen, so she responded, "Oh, it went well alright. For me, at least. The thing about this place is you have to make things go well for it to go well. Sway just once and the current will take you. And you'll drown yourself serving them if they don't drown you first."

"How ominously inspiring."

"Thank you."

He chuckled briefly - his first real laugh in months with someone other than his favorite niece. He felt lighter, more liberated.

Sush didn't warm up to many people upon a first meeting, but Greg's presence encouraged her to ramble on, "The fight— I mean, the 'discussion' with Valor was about an archer who's being put off-duty without reason, so I invaded the chameleon lounge for answers."

Unblinking, Greg demanded, "Why hadn't I seen that?"

Setting down the bagel, her eyes grew wide in feigned shock, a hand lifted in a hyperbolized gesture when she said, "I know! Can you believe it? Sure sucks to be you, Your Grace."

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Noting the sarcasm, Greg drew an inhale, reluctant to cut off this newly-built bridge. "Apologies, Alagumalai. Why didn't you know? Why weren't you informed?" She may not have known, but Greg drew some placidity from saying her name.

Resuming munching on her bagel, she said, "My guess? The one behind it probably didn't want a nuisance like me blocking the way."

"And you'd block the way for a whole cluster of reasons, I gather?"

"Of course. The last thing I need is another interspecies debacle to deal with."

There was a pause. Swallowing a snarl, eyes onyx, Greg questioned, "This poses a threat to the kingdom?"

Taking a glimpse around, Sush lowered her voice, admitting, "That's the thing, Your Grace - I don't know. That's why I cornered Valor. Just so you know, the four months dealing with the Delilah fiasco hadn't been easy for us either. I'm sure you bore the brunt of the whole thing, but the octopuses around you hadn't had a restful night since - through no fault of our own. If it makes things any easier, I'll keep you in the loop. You're not the only one demanding answers."

The certainty in her eyes brought his animal to a sit, despite its zest to pounce, threaten and kill. He didn't just have a lot to lose. He had everything to lose now that Enora was in the picture. His beast was as protective of the pup as his human was, whose onyx eyes faded in intensity when Sush mentioned keeping him in the loop. Drawing a breath to make sure he didn't say something offensive, he asked, "Where's the loop at now?"

Shaking her head in disapprobation, she said, "Valor claims to be acting on orders from the defense ministry. He gave me a copy of the email leading to the Administrative Division." Seeing his eyes leave her face and venture to the table, staring into space, Sush promptly added, "Do

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me a favor and don't get involved, Your Grace. This is my job scope. My jurisdiction. Let me handle it."

A faint smile of guilt pushed the corner of his lips at getting caught for what he really wanted to do, the emotion stitched a thread of humor into his fury, his animal growling quietly in respectful concurrence.

But was it just that - respectful concurrence and nothing more?

Greg was a creature known to never concur without a fight. His animal is no different. If he decided to get involved, he got involved. And he'd go all the way. No half-baked attempts. No loose ends. Either perfection or nothing at all.

Yet right now, even after he'd decided to squeeze every piece of intelligence out of the hunters before he came today, he couldn't find it in himself to encroach onto Sush's turf, especially after she'd spelled it out to him. It was a strange, unnerving feeling. There was something about this octopus that just made him listen.

No. Not strange. And not unnerving. He was Greg Claw. Nothing unnerved him.

There was only one word to describe the Chief Octopus - dangerous, probably like a siren. Maybe worse. She wasn't even singing and he was already being cordial.

When his cousin and cousin-in-law reminded him not to give the hunters a reason to rescind the agreement - in other words, not to be rude and offensive - Greg knew it'd be challenging. For better measure, the queen even whispered to Enora - with him present - that Uncle Greg promised "to be nice" on his work trip.

He didn't. If he made any promises, it would be to rain fire. Every single day. For the next three months.

But when Lucy emphasized it'd do himself a favor in the long run, he

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agreed to exercise control.

Sush - oddly - wasn't making things difficult. At all.

Not odd.

Dangerous.

Goddess, he'd have to drill that word into his and his animal's shared head.



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