

Chapter 34

Enora had told everyone at home that Greg didn't want to use Izabella's name even when they were talking about her - boasting that she and her uncle had a secret code that she refused to share, which upsetted Ken - so Lucy was careful to leave Izabella's name out.

"Well," Greg reflected. "There is a traffic cone that ticked me off."

Xandar defended, "Ella said Hazel seems okay, though."

"For the love of Goddess, don't take a warning hazard's side, cousin!"

"Don't deflect, Greg," Xandar hit back. "Take your time coming to terms with any internal turmoil you're experiencing and we just wanted to say that we'll be here for you and we're happy for you."

Greg narrowed his eyes at his sentimentality. His animal almost gagged. "There is literally nothing to be happy about. Nothing is happening and we're not even bonded. That makes this connection, if any, weaker than—."

"Are you sure about that?" Lucy interrupted before he finished. "What if this is just a Ydaer phenomenon?"

Ydaer was a scientist who studied mate bonds and discovered that creatures who hadn't let go of the past wouldn't be able to open themselves to feel the bond of a destined mate. Ydaer argued that holding onto bygones created an emotional block that muted a creature's senses and blinded them from feeling the one they were destined for. He theorized that the Goddess implanted this internal mechanism as a way of making sure a creature was "ready" to meet someone better before allowing the said creature to sense the second chance - a theory that was never confirmed due to the lack of evidence.

Lucy herself disagreed with the theory for the longest time since she never considered herself ready for any mate bond since the first. Only when Xandar barged into her life and loved her the way no one ever had did she understand: she was ready in the sense that she'd moved on from the opinions of her past mates, moved on from the experiences enough to stop herself from thinking about them to the point that she never thought about them anymore. Sure, there were those side-effects that lingered, and were only alleviated gradually through conscious healing, but she'd let that baggage go - focusing on her life to remind herself of her worth, to remember who she was, what she wanted, attributes she wouldn't compromise, and a purpose that - serendipitously - complemented her indecent beast's.

Greg shifted in his seat, declaring, "I have moved on from that woman. But that doesn't mean I want to feel another mate bond."

Lucy nodded, comprehending - the residual anger at the injustice of the situation laced heavy in his voice, giving him away. "Anyway," Lucy offered the diversion he sought. "Tell us about the simulation with the archers. It sounds interesting. Ella said Sush designed the versatile earplugs, is that true?"

"It is," Greg replied, letting his guard down the moment that conversation diverted from the mate bond. As he struggled to hide a smile at the mention of Sush, along with her ingenuity, he went on, "That's just one of the many things she came up with for the hunters. There's also the simulator itself, the safety features, the inventory system. And that's just the summary. She's... incredibly brilliant. Efficient. And anyone should see her scaring the shit out of the incompetent slackers in the trenches at least once in their lives. It really is t—"

Greg only realized he'd diverted himself to the very topic he sought to divert away from when the couple before him watched him with smiling

eyes, making him harrumph and redirect his point of focus. "So, the simulator." He droned on about the details and - at one point - admitted that it might even be a good addition to the Den.

They spoke until Enora finished the last of her homework and showed it to her mother, who made no comment on the rushed handwriting that were barely legible and gave her a pass to go to the park, where the pup shot the fake nests - kicking the ground when she missed and leaping into the air when she struck.

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That night, Greg lay awake thinking about his conversation with the king and queen, about the damn seed the queen planted in his head. Honestly, he'd only ever watch over her and her pups. Why did she have to mess up his mind like this?

He didn't want a mate, let alone a huntress for a mate.

No discussions. That was his decision. And that was final.

But as his consciousness drifted and his subconscious was left to wander, he began asking why Sush had to be a huntress, why hadn't he met her first. She was incomparable: so raw, so real, so direct, so... beautiful.

He couldn't help but agree with his cousin that he and Sush were very alike in terms of work ethic and ambition. Maybe even intelligence in some aspects, though there were times he'd readily admit she was better, such as the times when he had to decipher the inventions she came up with. And that made her all the more alluring.

His room suddenly felt too big, the bed too large, the place too soundless. He wanted to feel a warmth next to him, to hear a steady breathing or a snore, to reach out to put his arm over the breather, to hear her make a sound when he pulled her close.

He wanted it to be her.



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