

Chapter 36

Greg had been paying more attention to her facial transmutation after hearing from the queen - through Tristan - that Sush didn't smile a lot around anyone. He was surprised to learn that it was true. For someone who claimed to be able to extract humor from anything, she didn't smile a lot. That entire morning, as she checked on each department and handed out orders, her lips either remained flat or were pulled to a frown. Yet he himself had witnessed her smile - even laugh - several times in the previous week.

"They're still running through them. Nothing out of the ordinary yet," she said, slipping her tablet back in.

Thoughts of touching her took the backseat as his protective instincts kicked in. The suspect pool - in other words, the people who knew she was headed for the ministry - was enormous. As they passed streets and trees, he swallowed a lump in his throat, voice a deep baritone when he cautiously asked, "Do you know anyone who wants you dead?"

Without hesitation, she uttered, "I think it'd be easier to name people who don't want me dead."

"Why?" Greg snapped a little too loudly. The deep, protective rumble that promised vengeance ricocheted off the walls of the car and made its way into her heart, making the naive part of her swoon.

Shoving aside the way his words made her feel, she casually replied, "News flash, Your Grace. I spearheaded a negotiation that got many predecessors and top performers killed."

"Executed."

"Same difference."

Making a turn at a junction, he went on, "It wasn't your fault. They screwed up. We executed them for attempting to harm a member of the royal family. If there wasn't a negotiation, we'd wage war and kill all of you." A shot of pain launched to his heart at the thought of her dying by their hands.

"Good luck trying to win that argument," Sush responded monotonously. "The fact is: I'm a huntress. I'm supposed to side with my people."

"Mindlessly side with them?" He scoffed. "Senselessness doesn't suit you, Chief."

The edge of her lips tipped. Something about his eloquence with words that just made her smile without thought. "I don't think it suits me either, hence the targets on my head. I think I'm only safe now because they haven't decided on a suitable replacement yet."

"Sush," Greg exhaled. The way he said her name made her ears perk, brought her thoughts to a standstill, and made her heart stop. "Don't say that," he urged in a low murmur, almost begging, then paused, swallowing so many words yet the loudest ones slipped through, "You're not replaceable."

She didn't blink, nor did she move. Her mind went blank as her heart beat louder, faster. For the next minute, there was nothing but the quiet hum of the engine, the gentle blast of the air-conditioner. Greg's compliment would've sounded flat and professional if his tone wasn't so low and... gentle, almost intimate, like a gentle breeze brushing across her cheek. The words rippled within her, making her feel something - special, precious, treasured.

Greg didn't know what he was doing anymore. He'd thought he'd be keeping things cordial and professional, but it was proving to be difficult.

It was Sush who broke the silence when she cleared her throat while hoping Greg couldn't hear her racing heart. "Anyway, enough about whoever did whatever to my car. Once they've gone through the cameras, I'll know the culprit. Let's just... talk about something else."

He could hear her thumping heart, and the rhythm - though frantic - was beautiful, like horses galloping through a meadow. "What do you want to talk about?" he asked, hoping she'd calm down, wanting - needing - her to be at ease with him.

She sighed. She had hoped he'd pick. Talking about the weather would only go so far since they both hated small talk. "Did you have a good weekend?" That was an equally stupid question, she thought, but she couldn't think of anything else. He had a family and a special someone. Of course his weekend would be good!

"I did. You?"

Shooting him a glare, she said, "You did? That's all you're going to say? At least boast about your perfect life to make me question the defective one I'm living."

As a smile of incomprehensibility glided up his face, he questioned, "No one's life is perfect, Sush. Mine is no exception. What did you do last weekend?"

"Sleep. Eat. Avoid checking emails and messages. Archery on Sunday."

Greg's brows shot to his hair. "You shoot?"

Turning toward him, somewhat offended, she said, "Why are you so surprised? I'm not ill-equipped with weapons just because I'm an octopus."

"No. I know. I've seen you use a gun, but... I thought your kind only deals with modern weapons these days."

With a gentle nod, she replied, "That's true to a large extent. Archery isn't

a requirement. It's my leisure. There are all kinds of things to shoot at that range, not just the conventional stagnant targets. We shoot empty bottles, flying discs, balloons, those kinds of things."

"And which was it last Sunday?" he prompted, captivated by the melody in her voice that spoke for her happiness.

As Sush beamed brighter, she replied, "The balloons. It was fun. They're like heads floating about. Things I can imagine as people and shoot without legal repercussions."

That drew another chuckle out of Greg. He'd never thought of that. A moving target was more realistic and would be more entertaining in terms of leisure. "Is that your target of choice? The balloons?"

"No. I prefer the crockery set upwards on a moving train."

His smile faltered, eyes bulged wide, picturing it. "Pardon me, but... what?"

Her eyes rolled. "Not an actual train, Your Grace. A large-sized toy train. Placed at a distance. It took me a while to realize the most efficient way wasn't to aim at the crockery. Going for the rods connecting the wheels is the fastest way to win the game. I could smash ten plates with two arrows when the train turns over."

His face crumpled. "So shooting the train itself doesn't disqualify you?"

"Nope. If it did, lots of beginners would've been disqualified."

His features eased in understanding as he nodded. He then wondered if Sush was up to training his little sweetheart, if she could be trusted to do it, if Enora would like her to do it. Greg himself knew the basics of archery but he'd only ever practiced on immobile targets. Sush seemed to be taking it to another level.

"I hope you know this is a quid pro quo conversation, Your Grace. It's your turn to tell me what you did last weekend."

"Spent time with my family and went to the park."


"With your sweetheart?" she intended for it to come out as a tease, but a tinge of bitterness slipped through, one she couldn't take back.



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The mention of Enora got Greg on high alert. His pupils dilated, his claws underneath the innocuous nails ready, and his shoulders stiffened. It was common knowledge that the king and queen had pups, but it wasn't common knowledge that Greg shared a bond with their youngest. "How do you know about my sweetheart?" his voice dropped to a deep baritone as his eyes darkened.

Trying to sound bored, Sush looked out the windshield and uttered, "You took a call last week after work and rushed out after that, like you've been caught cheating on her."

There was one word in that sentence that smothered his defensiveness and splattered perplexity on him instead. For a brief second, he wondered if they were referring to the same person. Then, the waters of amused comprehension washed over him. So that explained the sudden change, the swift barrier erected overnight.

Failing at swallowing the chuckles, his eyes stayed focused on the road ahead as he continued thinking about it.

Sush, on the other hand, was not amused. "I take it that the misunderstandings have been cleared?" Some part of her hoped he'd say no but that bright smile she annoyingly found handsome already burst her bubble. She refrained from asking how they were cleared, in case it involved acts that would scar her mind the same way Hazel's personal answers were etched there forever.

Wondering how far he could take this, Greg began, "There wasn't a misunderstanding. She just called because I didn't ring her at our usual time."

'Our usual time' made Sush's fingernails dig into her thigh, creating

crested marks through the fabric. "She didn't fire you an endless list of questions to confirm your loyalty? What an unusual reaction."

Greg had a feeling pressing his lips together wasn't going to hold back the laughter for much longer. "She knows I'm loyal to her. Her whole family does. I'm practically at their mercy. In fact, it'd be unusual for her to doubt me. She's trusted me since she was several months old."

Sush tried to smile. Usually, when people tell her these things, she'd find it beautiful - something with a future that grew over time, like two seeds that met on the same tree being thrown apart before they grew into mature trees, where their branches touched, meeting once more. It made her believe that - no matter what - time brought two people together.

Today, however, she found nothing beautiful.

The sky was too blue. The clouds were too fluffy. The tar on the road was too faded. And why were there so many flowers there, there, and there? The petals would just fall off and litter the roads! And do you know who liked littered roads? Fucking no one!

Clearing her throat and regretting glancing at Greg as soon as she saw how much he glowed and how big his smile was, she said, "Talk about rekindling an old flame."

"The flame was never extinguished," Greg confided.

A shockwave channeled through Sush. "Not even when you were with Delilah?"

"No." Greg's head gave a slight shake, smile still broad. "Especially not then."

Sush mm-ed, taking note. Wouldn't that mean he cheated on Izabella? No one needed to physically be with another before it amounted to cheating in Sush's dictionary. Emotional straying constituted cheating

as well. Period. Greg was not the victim she thought he was. Delilah may have been the main villain but Greg wasn't blameless, she deduced, somehow liking him less for it.

When Greg put the car to a park and marveled at her thinking face, he felt he'd stretched the misperception far enough. Getting his phone from the console, he offered, "Let me show you a photo of her. She's the most adorable little creature to grace our world."

Little. Ha. Sush knew it. These big men, especially animalistic lycan men, had a penchant for little women. She knew it! Just look at the king and queen. Six footers like Sush wouldn't stand a chance, she thought. "There really is no need." She'd said it so defensively that it might as well have been 'no, thank you' plus throwing his phone out the window. Sush didn't want another face on a helium balloon. There already weren't enough balloons. "I don't want to know. Really. It's your priv—"

Greg unlocked his phone and swiped to the section of the homescreen with only one app for her to view the wallpaper in full, pushing his phone into her hand. Sush's eyes widened at the toddler in a white top and denim blue shorts, hair in a high, dark ponytail as she pulled back a rubber-tipped arrow fastened on a bow, lilac eyes fierce, staring ahead, sweaty streaks of hair clung to her temple.

What was she supposed to be looking at again? Sush asked herself.

"My five-year-old niece takes archery practice very seriously," Greg mused.

Their eyes met: his twinkled in mischief and amusement, hers burned with embarrassment and rage. "You little..." Sush growled, cheeks turning crimson, not sure from her anger or humiliation.

Copying her by raising his index finger to make his point, Greg said, "I am - by no means - little. But my sweetheart is. Look at her, she's cute, isn't she? Slightly violent at times. But cute."

Eyes following his back to the screen, she stared at Enora's picture for another two whole seconds before finally muttering to the phone, "I'm going to teach you to shoot his balls. Both at once. With real arrows."

His lycan rolled over and let out a loud guffaw, hand slamming on the floor of his mind. Sush looked like she was about to kill him and they weren't even afraid. They wanted to see her pounce and see what else she'd do.

"Now that we've cleared that up," Greg said, plucking his phone out of her hand and turning off the ignition, he continued, "Let's get this Monica Upshaw mystery over with and grab a few bagels and coffee after."

He wanted to close this case? Just like that?

Since the damn phone call the previous week, Sush had been riding an ongoing cycle of rage, self-judging, then telling herself she and Greg weren't even a good fit so the fact that he had someone didn't matter! Now he was declaring that they'd 'cleared that up'? Excuse him!

Her finger jabbed at his shoulder that felt like concrete, and she spoke through fiery eyes, "You just got yourself demoted. You can stay in your fucking car like an Uber driver while I do this myself. I'll just tell them the team member had an unexpected accident."

"What accident?" he asked, almost challengingly, his smile still intact.

Her fist was about to land on the part of his chest where his heart was - because he'd toyed with her emotions during their entire conversation - but Greg caught it just in time, hand wrapping around her clenched fist, his force unmatched. Her second fist sought to deliver a blow to his jaw but Greg caught that one, too.

He was unperturbed, still amused. He didn't even look like he was exerting any force when she was already perspiring from the endeavor. "Jealousy looks interesting on you, Sush. Positively interesting."

Her cheeks developed a deeper shade of red as she hissed, "Save your self-flattery for another occasion. I'm going to set you and this car on fire as soon as I get off." She didn't know how but she was going to do it. Should've kept a lighter in her back pocket.

"How about you save that for why we actually came? And maybe we should take a minute to calm down before scorching the people in that building," he suggested, voice mellowing and imploring, his thumbs gingerly stroking her fists, feeling the width of her fingers, the hardness of her knuckles.


That was when he felt a tingle, a low voltage of current slipping into his veins from their touch.



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It wasn't the mate bond, Greg knew that much. The sparks from one would be stronger, clearer, more will-bending. This wasn't it. But the flicker warmed his skin, dilated his pupils, and made his heart beat like a pack of rogues running toward their prey.

Reluctantly releasing her hands, he uttered, "Let's go. We don't want to be late."

Both doors lifted and Sush was forced to get out of the car when the person she wanted to scream at had already gotten out. The temptation to yell was as strong as the need to hide away for a few hours until she'd decided how best to present herself again after that debacle.

She was jealous, even though they weren't anything.

What were they, exactly?

Historically speaking, they were enemies by nature. Hunters used to have this bad habit of... well, hunting. And for the longest time, they liked a challenge, so they hunted beasts like werewolves and lycans for leisure. Hunting werewolves was doable and safe at first. Hunting lycans was safe for a short while until the lycans rounded up the wolves and they hunted the hunters together.

To summarize history, the hunters' fun ended there - when lycans waged war and launched a surprise attack, decimating over half of the small population of hunters. Only two archers were left standing and even they were taken hostage to ensure a "peaceful settlement" was reached. The corpses and bloodshed served as a brutal reminder of how unmatched humans were against those beasts. The hunters may have had oleander but even that didn't help win battles or the war. The birthmarks on their napes were just that - marks. They didn't give them

a boost of strength, speed and instant healing that was desperately needed with creatures of that size and caliber.

Anyway, that was history. They weren't supposed to be enemies anymore after Greg was bonded to Delilah but that optimistic future took a major turn, obviously. So they were probably back to square one. And yet, Sush didn't feel like they were.

The conspiracy of Delilah et al. may have been the interspecies stir of the century but the lycans and werewolves didn't attack. They negotiated. Forcefully, but they still did.

And there was an issue with how Greg could have pushed any and every one of her buttons since the first day yet didn't. Once he'd gotten everything stipulated in the treaty, he didn't do anything that made their lives more difficult even though he could easily rebuke them for their less than perfect systems, drop a snarky remark or two a day or do something petty like steal or misplace documents on purpose. But he didn't.

Don't even get her started on the ongoing bagel purchase.

So between her and him, they clearly weren't enemies. But did that make them friends? Allies? Maybe something... more?

No.

The bottom line was he was a duke and she was a huntress. The last time a pairing like this happened, the huntress ended up dead - not that Sush disagreed with the outcome - and the duke ended up angry, betrayed and heartbroken. There was no way he'd let it happen again. And there was no way she'd choose him over executing the plan she'd kept to herself for years.

They crossed paths at the wrong time, in the wrong circumstance, she felt. They could be friends, but she doubted either of them would consider crossing that line they'd mutually drawn to keep each other at

a safe distance.

But if the distance was safe, why did she feel safer with him close? Did he feel it, too? Or did he prefer her behind the line, at a distance?

"What is going on in that head of yours?" His voice, an inviting octave, drew her eyes to his. Even as they strolled through the front doors, they were trained on her. The lilac there offered so much attention and held such deep curiosity, maybe even fragments of concern.

Reminding herself to think straight, she lied, "My head's flipping through history, searching for a viable way to plot my revenge against you and your car using your niece. Fortunately for you, I can't think of anything at the moment."

The concern dissipated, curiosity traded for mirth as his lips tugged just the slightest. "I suppose it's rational to want to kill me for not being able to read your mind."

Disregarding the sarcasm for the second time that day, she uttered, "I'm glad you agree."

They had to stop the moment they reached the front desk, where the receptionist informed them that the defense minister was still in a meeting and required Sush and Greg to wait a while. On the registration form, Sush was careful to leave Greg's name out, simply labeling his presence as her team member before handing it back to the receptionist. They waited three minutes before the defense minister had the front desk send them up.

The receptionist knew who Greg was and was aware of what Sush was playing at, but made no comment and gave them a passcard to ascend.

The doors opened to the sixteenth floor, and Sush stepped out to have someone call her name from the left corridor. Her guard lowered and her gaze pivoted as she turned to the source.

Deputy Defense Minister, Agu Adebayo, beamed broadly. He stood at six-foot-three with short hair and a good build. He was an octopus and used to work in the trenches, hence had been acquainted with Sush before joining the ministry.

To Greg's surprise - and annoyance - he and Sush wrapped each other in an embrace which lasted a little too long for Greg's comfort - even though it was only two seconds, tops. A low growl rumbled under his animal's breath and his human followed his instinct to stand next to her.

Agu's eyes trailed to the duke, holding onto his smile as best he could and stretched out his hand, greeting, "Your Grace."

"Minister," Greg addressed curtly, reluctantly. When their hands collided, it took a lot of strength to refrain from crushing all the bones there.

Sensing the coldness instantly, Agu strayed back to Sush and began, "I'd ask how everything is going but you being here on short notice must mean bad news."


"I hope not," Sush said. "You really couldn't find anything?"



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"I could," he admitted, eyes dimming, jaw clenched taut as his eyes flickered to his superior's office for a brief second. "But it's just marked as confidential. And - for some reason - I, as deputy, am not privy to matters concerning the highest level of national security. I never knew there was more than one level of national security until last week."

"Can't you appeal?" Sush pressed.

"At what cost, Sush?" His voice lowered into a murmur as he looked around, feigning a smile at his colleagues down the corridor. "You know how it is here. Ferdinand has been in this office since I was shooting hoops in high school. I've only been here for over a year."

Sush firmly insisted, "You got into office because you qualify to be here, Agu."

"We both know that, but to appeal for more power, which essentially requires me to go behind Ferdinand's back to do it... it requires support. Majority support. I doubt the president would veto such a thing. As much as times are changing, it hasn't changed enough for people like us to make that move without being kicked out. You remember Sarauniya. She didn't just fight for people like us, she fought for everybody, and they still thought she was too rebellious to be kept in the ranks."

"There were too many small minds in the defense ministry in her time anyway. I always saw her as President."

Agu's lips tugged high. "Me too. She was the noblest archer and hunter I've ever had the pleasure of working with in my time at the headquarters." The smile withered a bit when he continued, "It's sad having to see her stand behind Ferdinand on our visits to the troops

she's training but she told me she'd rather be somewhere she could make a difference, even if it was a slight one."

Sush pinned him a look and uttered, "You're somewhere you can make a difference too, Agu. You just have to want to do it. You've come this far. If you need support, either find it or create it."

His eyes roved warily again before he muttered, "I'll try." Seeing his secretary a few feet away about to remind him of a meeting he was already late for, Agu gave the young man a nod and turned back to Sush. "Nice talking to you, Sush, as always. Don't send my regards to Hazel. In fact, don't tell her we ran into each other at all. And you still owe me a coffee and shooting session."

"Shoot what? You?" Greg hummed.

Both pairs of eyes turned to him as Agu released a short, awkward, lonely chuckle and replied, "I'm pretty sure the lycans would beat her to that, Your Grace. I'll uh... leave you both to it."

Greg's onyx eyes seared into him until he was out of sight before they trailed back to a smug-looking octopus, who remarked, "Jealousy looks interesting on you, Your Grace. Positively interesting."

Sush had expected him to either deny, change the subject, or fire back with a snide comment, so nothing prepared her when he smirked, stepped so close that she could feel the heat radiating from his being as he towered over her, and said, "Come now, Sush. We're way past using titles."

Those words did something to her heart; his voice sent a pleasurable trail of heat throughout her body and moistened her lower region; the manner he spoke didn't penetrate into her soul, but worse - touched her in a fingerlike caress, teasing her and tempting her to beg for more; and the way he looked at her - with darkened eyes that held a type of hunger she wasn't unfamiliar with - sent a hot flush to her face.

"Alagumalai?" A voice boomed from the end of the corridor.

This was the first time - and hopefully last time - Sush was grateful to the defense minister for anything. At least he made a good save, even if it was unintentionally done and the one calling her was his secretary as the minister himself sat behind his desk, a yellow stress ball being fisted in hand as he waited.

Sush pushed past Greg who followed at her heels. An obnoxiously arrogant smile tipped the corner of his lips as he subtly inhaled the remaining scent of her arousal lingering in the hallway, storing it in his lungs like the animal that he was before his attention turned to the big shot they came to see.

The defense minister had silver hair with a receding hairline on the right, but he looked fit for someone in his fifties, which shouldn't be a surprise since he was a chameleon, a type of hunter that generally looked good at any age. Those blue eyes held as much disapproval and distaste as much as that grim line pulling down his lips. He should lose the yellow ball, Greg thought. It made him look like one of those kids who picked fights with people they couldn't handle.

At Ferdinand's door, where Sush greeted him and he remained leaned-back in his swivel chair and stayed silent in response, the defense minister's eyes glued to Greg.

Greg didn't bother offering him a greeting first. Ferdinand was not his superior. Greg didn't even greet his own cousin every time they met. It would always depend on his mood. And his cousin was king. Ferdinand was just a minister.

If this human was waiting for one of the only two lycan dukes in the kingdom to extend the courtesy, the minister's inflated sense of self-esteem was in for a wait to eternity. During the silent battle, Greg began finding Ferdinand familiar, though he couldn't quite put his finger on


what it was yet.



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