

## Chapter 40

"Your Grace. This is a surprise." Ferdinand finally yielded.

"I can tell, seeing that your shock impeded your visual and auditory perception," Greg replied monotonously, still disregarding the man's title and position. The gears in his head continued to turn. They'd never met. He'd seen the man's photo, but that wasn't where Greg recognized... parts of him. This person - his energy and scent were as new as they were foreign, but segments of his features reminded Greg of someone. He just couldn't figure out who.

Ferdinand's frown forced itself into a superficial smile as he straightened himself in his seat. Dropping the ball next to a paperweight, he stated, "I can see and hear you, Your Grace."

"Presumptuous and obtuse if you think I was talking about your behavior toward me."

Brows crinkled and forehead creased, Ferdinand took a moment to decipher those words before his eyes beat his brain when they ventured to Sush, who was looking at Greg like she was trying to get their gaze to lock in order to stop him. The minister's throat bobbed, a sliver of wariness entered his eyes before they cleared and he uttered, "Alagumalai, has His Grace been guided through our procedures before entering my office today?"

Sush's gaze left Greg when she answered, "The treaty allows for his presence without procedural compliance, minister. Clause 7.4."

"Really?" he murmured in doubt.

Greg interjected, "You mean to say you didn't read the clauses copied to you throughout the negotiation?"

"I have, Your Grace." Ferdinand eked out that same empty smile. "And, if I remember correctly, it states that procedure is only waived if it pertains to the kingdom's security, which we haven't established whether it is yet."

"You mean to say after that stunt your kind pulled off, I'm going to wait and trust your judgment on whether this concerns the kingdom's safety? " More importantly, on whether this concerned Enora's safety. Greg watched Ferdinand's throat bobbed, the blue eyes flickered out of the window to hide a gleam of exasperation.

Sush took over, "His presence was approved when the treaty was signed . And him being here is not our biggest issue. I need to know the reason behind Monica Upshaw's off-duty schedule."

"And why is this pertinent?" Ferdinand's head swung to her as he challenged. "You're an employee of the hunters. Your question concerns issues handled by the ministry. You've been told this was confidential yet here you are. There's a line that did not disappear just because you were appointed as the new chief, Alagumalai."

"I, of all people, am well aware of that line." Sush refuted as calmly as the cold sea, though her insides had already exploded and even an island miles away would've been able to sight the smoke brimming from her internal volcano. "If I wasn't, I would've barged through your doors when Catrine Carter was put off-duty for the very same confidential reason. But I didn't. Because that was within my predecessor's jurisdiction. Since I'm leading the brains and mechanics of the hunters now, this issue is within my jurisdiction because it concerns a hunter. The ministry crossed the line when it touched one of us, effectively getting me involved. Where is Upshaw now?"

"Executing a governmental task."

"Which one?"

Ferdinand leaned back into the chair like it was just another boring meeting when he answered, "Strictly confidential."

"Where?" Sush pressed.

"That's equally confidential."

A silence descended into the room, so clear one could hear the wall clock tick, so explicit the speech from the next room snuck through in muffled chomps.

Sush's insistence didn't waver, her eyes didn't tame, her will didn't bend when her voice, low and cautionary permeated through, "For all of our sakes, I hope this isn't another Delila—"

"Watch your words, Chief." Ferdinand's voice cut her off like a blade slid across paper. "I agree the patterns between Carter and Upshaw have their similarities, but let me remind you Carter was in no way connected to Delilah and the others. So this does not pertain to the kingdom, nor does it concern you in terms of jurisdiction. The defense ministry is still superior to hunters headquarters. We hold the final word in security issues and your job is to take orders as they come, not question them to hinder efficiency."

A low snarl slipped through Greg's slightly parted lips even as Sush shot him a look. His eyes may be onyx but he was seeing red. Sush assumed Greg would hurl a derisive comment if she didn't stop him when - in fact - all Greg wanted to do at the moment was to go old-school and pounce. With claws. Maybe even canines. Who the fuck did this puny old man think he was, talking to her like that?

Then, a soft but sharp whisper pierced through his ears, "Greg, don't. I'm handling this."

The order pulled his plotting for the minister's murder to a halt, the way she said his name receded his anger and obliged his lycan to sit.

Comprehension entered the minister's eyes as quickly as it left, thinking to himself that this was an unexpected development.

When Sush turned back to Ferdinand, she uttered, "If anything happens to her, know that the blood is on your hands. I have exhausted every possible way to keep all hunters safe. If you insist on holding up the drawbridge, you bear the consequences."

"You're making something out of nothing, Alagumalai. She's safe."

"I thought no one on a confidential assignment for the government could ever be guaranteed their safety. When has this changed?" Sush questioned.

He lied. He lied and he was caught. They just didn't know what the lie was. Either Monica Upshaw was not on a governmental task or she wasn't actually safe.

Rising from his chair and jabbing a button by the paperweight, Ferdinand muttered, "We are done here. You're both dismissed."

His secretary flung the door open and showed them out even though Sush had been in the building countless times and wouldn't get lost even with her eyes closed. She and Greg passed Agu's office. He pacing about, phone glued to his left ear as his mouth moved. His brows rose like he was asking her how it went, and her head gave a subtle shake to say "not well". Agu then pressed his lips into a line and shrugged at one shoulder - the indication that they couldn't do anything at the moment. Powerless subordinates.

If there was one thing Sush hated more than Valor, it was helplessness.

Back in Ferdinand's office, the old man sank back into his chair and heaved a bone-tired sigh as Sush and Greg disappeared into the elevator. His nervous-looking secretary stood by the door, so Ferdinand nodded at him and demanded, "What?"

"A call just came in, minister. About Catrine Carter."

A brow lifted. "That woman is really filling the space in these walls today. What about her?"


Face ashen, the young man swallowed and uttered, "They said she's dead."



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## Chapter 41

"WHAT?" Sush's voice blared in Greg's car and his lycan was pushed back by the volume before he got back up and demanded his human to ask what was going on.

Sush put Hazel on speaker as the deputy reported at a frantic pace, "...autopsy said she'd been dead for ten hours before the body was found. They took a full hour to identify her before notifying us about..." Greg double-parked as Hazel's voice continued ringing through. "...the cause of death - multiple stab wounds to her chest, abdomen and face. No belongings were taken. Cash, credit cards, a five-figure watch remained intact and present on the property. They weren't after money. Valor is sending four archers to retrieve her body and the defense ministry has been notified. Did Ferdinand say anything?"

"No, but..." Sush sighed. "I wonder if he already knew when we were there."

"You asked about Monica Upshaw?"

"Yes."

Hazel's voice angled on a wary edge when she asked, "And what did he say?"

"That she's safe."

There was a dead pause, then Hazel's voice came through, "Let's hope she is. Because I doubt anyone wants to follow in Catrine's footsteps after learning about this destiny of hers. Anyway, that's the report. Is there anything else I haven't done that I should do?"

"Alert every hunter across the globe and order them to find Monica Upshaw."

Voice lowered into a whisper, her deputy asked, "Can we do that, though? Do we have th—"

"Haze, I don't care! Upshaw could be next. Find her and warn her. I'll deal with Ferdinand, Valor and the entire freaking army when the time comes. Just find her."

"Alrighty, Chief," Hazel squeaked.

After Sush hung up, Greg asked, "Should we head back to the ministry?"

Two silent minutes passed as Sush's downcast eyes roved left to right again and again like she was speed-reading a plan at the last minute when she was really just staring into space. In an almost inaudible whisper, she murmured, "No. If he doesn't want to tell us, there's nothing we can do to pursue the matter. But..." she sighed, leaning into the headrest, already knowing she was going to regret her next words, which she prattled through with shut eyes, "I need your hackers to get into the defense ministry's files and communications without leaving a trace." When there was nothing but silence from his end, she prompted, "Can they do it? Without leaving a trace?"

The pads of her fingers pressed on her forehead like she was getting a migraine. Then, a large hand - callous and warm - cupped her jaw, imploring her eyes to open as he gingerly turned her face for her to look into his lilac orbs. "They can. But are you sure that's what you want, Sush?"

Sush didn't know how else to keep the rest of them safe. She didn't have the extent of information to predict a weak spot prone to attack. She may not be with the hunters for much longer, but that didn't mean she didn't care about them at all. Resigned, she muttered, "Yes."

Her orders - written and oral - normally came out loud and certain. One could hear her barking orders through her texts and emails even without any exclamation points present. All instructions were delivered

with confidence that it was the right way forward.

This was the first time Greg had heard it filled with so much skepticism. What troubled him most was the vulnerableness in her eyes and the frailty in her voice.

His thumb trailed along her jawline, conveying the way it curved and angled to memory when her breath hitched, making him pause. His hand was about to let go. But her face - ever so slightly - leaned into his touch. The reaction was imperceptible to the eye but tangible to the touch - the gentlest pressure leaning against it like a head would a pillow.

She relaxed, his eyes following the movement of her parted lips as she slowly released the puff of air, anxiety leaving with the brief exhalation. The tip of his thumb traced the outline of her lower lip, his eyes fixated there like he was in a trance. He took his time, following the upward and downward bend of the delicate structure.

So soft. So plump. So perfect.

Neither of them knew how much time had passed before Greg uttered, "Anytime you want the hacking to stop, just say the word and I'll pull the plug, okay? You have a say in this. It's your department, your people, your jurisdiction. You're not doing this alone. We'll get to the bottom of this together, you hear me?"

His voice was imbued with a sense of control, a control that Sush really wasn't feeling in herself at the moment. Everything happened so fast. One minute she was arguing with Ferdinand about Monica Upshaw, quoting the Catrine Carter pattern, and the next minute Carter was reported dead. For ten hours. How did a huntress die without anyone knowing for ten fucking hours?

"Sush," Greg noticed her attention leaving, guilt setting its dirty foot in her eyes, and he brought her back. "One, it's not your fault. Two, it's not



over. We'll handle this. We'll stop this, with or without Valor, Ferdinand and the other imbeciles, alright?"

Mental and emotional fatigue got the better of her, and all she could do was nod, though her gratitude was channeled clearly through her eyes, accepting the certainty flowing from his. The back of his hand glided across her jawline before trailing down her neck, stopping right before the golden chain of her necklace, and he tore himself away.

His eyes glazed over, linking Jade, who was happy to finally have something far more interesting to work on than scanning systems and files like a robot. There was something about the forbidden nature of hacking that gave him a shot of adrenaline and brought his soul to life.

Eyes cleared, Greg turned back to Sush, who was now looking out of the window, seeing the droplets of the rain trickle down in tiny blobs. One hand was on her neck, between her collarbones, slender fingers fiddling with the locket; the other lay on her lap in a clenched fist.

Keeping a worried exhale to himself, his hand cautiously reached for the fist, covering it like a blanket, not expecting it to loosen like it did when he said, "Let's just get something to eat and focus on our next move."

She mm-ed, fingers letting go of the locket, fist unclasped completely, allowing his fingers to slide between hers, letting their palms meet before he began driving again.

The death was unsettling. The more Sush thought about it, the more she felt Catrine Carter was stationed at a remote location for the very reason to be killed.

What if the one who stabbed Catrine to death wasn't an external assailant but someone sent by the defense ministry or - God forbid - the hunters' headquarters itself? What if it was something within the headquarters that Sush herself was not privy to despite being the Chief Octopus, something only available in a physical archive? What if Catrine


discovered something that a higher-up didn't want found, and died before she could report it?



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## Chapter 42

Sush and Greg were the only two at the cafeteria. Two mugs of black coffee sat between them, along with cream puffs, bagels and a chicken sandwich - all untouched, even after Greg had spread the cream cheese for her.

"One thing, Sush," Greg urged, leaning in. "Just eat one thing."

She blinked, coming back to the room. Eyes assessed her options, and she picked up half a bagel - the half with a more generous amount of cream cheese, biting into it without really tasting the flavors and texture.

Greg popped a cream puff into his mouth as he continued watching her, praying Jade got the archives and correspondences fast so her mind would be kept away from the whys and focused on the hows.

This must be how Kenji felt, Sush thought. Shocked. Rattled.

She didn't take the eastern deaths easy but the western death somehow felt worse, even though Catrine Carter was as much a stranger as the archers from the east. Why was that? She wondered. Both murders were unexpected. Both happened beyond their control...or did they? Some part of Sush felt she retained a degree of control over the one in the west, because she saw the red flags, even brought it up, but didn't argue it through, didn't fight til the end.

She chose not to pick a fight with Patterson and Valor about reassigning Carter to a less deserted location and one with a better reception and connectivity. She could have argued, may have had a shot at pulling her out, but she didn't. Would it have made a difference to Carter's life?

Thinking about how off-putting Catrine Carter's personality was didn't

make Sush feel any better. Someone who deserved to be scratched in the face didn't necessarily deserve to be murdered. Just look at herself: Sush would be the first to admit she was neither the nicest nor the most accommodating person one could have anywhere - on a team, in a room, at a dinner - but that didn't mean she deserved to die... right?

The cafeteria door swung open. The click of the footsteps halted briefly before the pitter-patter charged toward the only occupied table. Sush's back faced the door yet she didn't have to turn to know who was coming toward her. Funny thing about footsteps - everyone carried a different beat, a different click, a distinct shuffle or lack thereof.

Greg, on the other hand, trained his eyes on Patterson like it was a warning that he would attack if the Chief Chameleon so much as say one offensive word to his octopus.

Patterson's mouth opened but before the words came out, Sush spoke at her usual volume and tone, "What?"

His instincts made him take an uneasy glance at Greg. The modicum of confidence that the chameleon had at the door must have ebbed away as he approached the table. The wisp of unease niggling at his stomach quickly morphed into wariness, undoubtedly affected by the lethal energy radiating off the duke.

Clearing his throat like it would boost his confidence, Patterson turned back to Sush. "Valor... asked to get you to screen through the chameleons assignment posts and let us know if anything needs ame —"

Sush scoffed, muttering, "So that's what it takes to be heard around here. Death. Of the relevant type of hunter. Good to know."

Valor didn't even demand a screening after the six archers' death in the east. SIX. Now, one chameleon died and their commander suddenly decided to pull up his socks.

Sush and a few others had been conducting the screening after the six deaths, though. Without being told to. They hadn't found anything awry from the east yet. And after the assassinations, Kenji had been bound to require approvals from Sush and Valor for everything - from the biggest decisions like new recruits to the smallest ones like fixing a system bug. It was ridiculous. Kenji's skills were superior to Sush's when it came to bugs. There were times when she consulted him to have her bugs fixed. Sush had pointed out the absurdity, but Valor didn't give a damn even though the noble leader himself knew nothing about building and fixing systems either.

Patterson bit the inner walls of his mouth, taking her hit without thinking of hitting back for the first time. "Valor and I agree this is our fault, our oversight. You warned us. We didn't listen. And Catrine paid the price."

As Sush lifted the mug and tipped it to the left, then right, watching her drink swirl, she asked, "Did Valor's ego grow a bruise so big he couldn't move his ass and tell me this himself?"

"He's actually at LG 2 now," Patterson disclosed. "We left his office at the same time. Spent the past hour with Ferdinand on speaker. I came to grab an espresso. They ran out on our floor. And Valor was heading straight down."

"Hm," bringing the mug to her lips, Sush murmured, "How the tables have turned - him hunting me down instead."

Patterson shifted his weight from his right foot to the left, one hand rubbed his nape. "And uh... I'd say take your time on the screening, but Valor and Ferdinand was hoping it could be done by th—"

"I know. Anything else?"

"Uh, no, I don't think so. I'll uh... let you know if there is." Turning to a stone-faced Greg, he nodded in acknowledgment. "Your Grace."

After fetching his espresso, he left, and Greg heard Patterson heave a mildly relieved sigh when he was a few steps to the door.

Greg watched as Sush's tough, callous exterior melted away, replaced with the woman he'd seen in the car, worry and distress tainting her otherwise perfect face. Deciding to distract her from herself, he began, "Leaking Dam isn't taking the news well either. Never thought he'd have it in him to care about his followers that much."

Sush's brows crinkled at the nickname. Her brain cells shifted from the ways she could've prevented Catrine's death, concentrating fully on who Greg was referring to. As she watched Greg take a sip from his mug, his eyes never leaving her, the epiphany came and her eyes narrowed, a reaction that tipped the edge of his lips as he set down the mug.

Patterson's dam of arousal leaked the other day and it almost welcomed a slaughter. The label was innocuous enough to be casually dropped anywhere while still capturing the essence of its origins.

Brows pinched, she questioned, "Is this why you have hundreds of followers under your command? So you'll have more time and brain power to get creative with names for everyone?"

If it'd distract her when she needed to be distracted, then yes, he'd block out time and brain power doing it. "You have to admit, the names I come up with are better suited to them than the ones their parents gave them without even knowing them."

This miraculously pulled the smallest smile out of her as she shook her head slowly, more from amusement than disapproval. If she was being honest with herself, there'd been no disapproval at all. Though naming Hazel a traffic cone would prove to be a problem. Her hair color changed every few months. Before orange, it was bubblegum blue. Sush chose not to bring it up, not wanting to give Greg any ideas. Yet.

Her thoughts went back to what he said - about Patterson not taking


Catrine's death well. Bringing her mug to her lips, her smile withered when she said, "Funny how the heart works - hanging onto a person long after the relationship is over. Guess Leaking Dam still cares about the latest dead chameleon even after their breakup years ago."



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