

Chapter 43

Greg's thumb fiddling the ear of the mug paused, eyes enlarged and jaw tensed, finding no humor in Sush, who simply shrugged.

Annoyance set in, and he noted pointedly, "Sush, as much as I want to, we've established that I can't read your mind. Kindly elaborate."

She was going to tell him. She just didn't know where to start. Patterson and Carter were an item for quite a while, before Sush herself joined the hunters. Greg's impatience had put a stop to her mind that had already been slowed from the day's events. The words "as much as I want to" did most of the magic, conjuring thoughts that Sush never thought she had.

Deciding for herself that she needed something uplifting if she were to survive the remaining hours of the day, her lips tipped into a smile - one Greg instantly recognized as the one she showed before she was about to drop a tease. "I don't think any clause in the treaty obligates a disclosure of that particular information, Your Grace."

The manner she uttered his title was different. It carried a distinctive tune, one enough to threaten a leak of his own dam as he swallowed a hungry growl. Her light tone carried a level of playfulness, but her eyes held a tantalizing challenge that - for some reason - affected his groin.

Leaning in with the obnoxiously arrogant smirk that turned her on back at the ministry, he was pleased to see that it was affecting her even before he'd begun speaking. A faint whiff of her arousal invaded the space between them as she shifted in her seat, probably trying to hide it.

Using the same deep voice to keep his momentum, Greg said, "Since it's not in the treaty, I'd have to find... other ways of getting that intel - is that what you're saying, Sush?"

"Pretty much," she replied casually, hoping it'd alter the atmosphere before she heated up completely.

But Greg wasn't done just yet. She started this game. He wasn't letting her off the hook until he was done playing. Eyeing her like a predator, he questioned, "So you want me to choke it out of you?"

The gleam in his eye and the image she imagined solely from those words intensified her arousal, fogging her mind. It took Greg everything to restrain himself and his animal from taking her right in the middle of the cafeteria floor.

As difficult as it was to resist him, Sush bit her lip to hide an upward curl that betrayed her, lifting the mug to her lips again to properly mask it, hoping her arousal couldn't be detected yet when - in fact - Greg was already breathing in the delicious scent like oxygen to his lungs.

Pulling herself out of the dirty fantasy, she simply uttered, "If allies had to choke one another for intel, they're not really allies. All you had to say was please."

"Oh, my dear." He chuckled, brief and dark. "When we get far enough, you'll be the one using that word, again and again, heaving it like you need air..." His gaze dropped to her mouth. "...gasping it as you ache for more, begging me to give you every inch." Eyes trailing back to her increasingly flushed face, he declared, "That word would be the only one you'd know, apart from my name."

Knowing he wasn't going to back out despite her efforts, she leaned in, leveled her eyes with his, looked into the lilac with a dare, and whispered, "Are you talking about you or me?"

The dare - coupled with that voice and that fucking upward curl of her lips - did it: broke his dam, and Greg was beyond grateful that he was the only animal in the cafeteria, though the darker side of him didn't mind having an audience, more than ready to announce his claim over

the creature that he was going to make his.

His momentary surprise boosted her confidence and she continued in the same quiet tone, "Something tells me you may have used the wrong pronouns, Greg."

Greg had no idea what it was in her voice, but the way she said his name was overpowering. At the ministry, it restrained him. Now, it enticed him, and he was willing to do anything to hear her say it again and again. For the first time since they met, Greg allowed his searing eyes trail from the crown of her head to her face down her neck to the jutting collarbone that wasn't covered by her shirt, then moving down to the curve of her breasts - practically undressing her with his eyes. All while she watched him do it.

When her breathing hitched and arousal intensified, his arrogant smirk came back in place, eyes meeting hers once more, knowing she was too deep to climb out now. "I think my linguistic proficiency remains proficient. Perhaps you'd like to look over your own."

Before Sush could respond, Greg's smile fell as his peripheral vision caught something, making him clear his throat, effectively wiping away the inappropriate atmosphere for a more professional one when he murmured, "You might want to lie about the redness of your face. Your noble leader is headed our way."

Despite frantically trying to forget the last few minutes, Sush waved a hand like it'd be no big deal in hopes of calming herself when she speedily murmured, "Sure, I'll just say you infuriated me by being an asshole in Ferdinand's office."

"That could work if you're able to adjust the way you're looking at me on time."

"What does that mean?" she asked as the heavy footsteps drew nearer.

Greg stole a glance of her before looking straight ahead once more,

swallowing before stating, "You don't look infuriated. Not the mildest. You look flushed."

Thinking fast, she decided, "Then I'll just say you've been humiliating me and the hunters' competence after learning about Carter's death."

"Or I've been humiliating you about your ineptitude in pronouns. That could work. It isn't even a lie."

"Fuck you," Sush hissed in the lowest whisper she could manage at his unhelpfulness.

"Looking forward to it," Greg murmured, face dead and tone flat when Valor finally reached the table, at which time Sush's face looked a little less red and a lot more vexed.

Since Valor possessed no senses to detect the heat and arousals, he greeted Greg, who acknowledged him with a curt nod, before the commander turned to the Chief Octopus. Valor spent the next most torturous three minutes of his life saying the things Patterson said before, and almost choked when he had to cough out the word "apologize" that Greg snorted, earning a quick glare from his octopus before he forced his lips into a straight line that was not going to hold for another sixty seconds.

After Valor left, Sush kicked Greg at his knee and the duke could only look at her with the widest smile, declaring with admiration and pride, "Goddess, you are wondrous. Getting an apology from a misogynist without coercion." Shaking his head in pure awe, he added, "I doubt another huntress in history managed such a feat."

As much as those words became the fingers that caressed her heart, Sush gave a slight shake of her head as her index finger came up, moving left to right like the pendulum on a metronome. "He and Patterson need my help and most likely want me to go easy on them while I screen and report. Let's not forget it took a death to manage

such a feat."

"Which brings us back to the topic before our... heated discussion."

Greg leaned back with a knowing smirk, prompting, "What's the story behind Patterson and Carter?"

Sush stared into space, recalling the facts. "They were in a seemingly steady relationship, even known as the it couple not just amongst the chameleons, but amongst the hunters as a whole. There were rumors that people had seen them fucking in parks and parking lots. They were even caught doing it in the printing room on the machine once. Yes, it was sanitized after that. No, no one used it again. All seemed well until Patterson returned early from a work trip in the east. He caught Carter and another hunter doing it in one of the male stalls. And they were done. Patterson never dated again. But Carter, fuh!" Sush shook her head, arms crossed as she leaned back. "Carter moved on. Fast. That hunter she was caught with? Logan Larson."

Greg's wide eyes grew impossibly wider. His former mate's boyfriend. How did Izabella fit into this, though?

It was as if Sush read his mind. "Carter and Larson had a very brief fling, lasting several weeks. Delilah came into the picture as a new recruit and Carter's status had been single since."

After a short pause, at which time Greg's surprise morphed into disbelief, he questioned, "Carter had never screwed anyone since? You're sure?"

"No, I am not," Sush readily admitted with a matter-of-fact shake of her head. "One thing you need to know about me, Greg, is that gossip reaches me last. Something that doesn't concern my career would have to be bigger than a wildfire to get my attention. If irrelevant scandals and tales have reached me, it has reached everyone. I'm not privy to the personal lives of the hunters if it doesn't affect their work and our

systems. So, no, I'm not sure if Carter has screwed another since Larson. I'd bet she was if you're asking me to speculate. She had men drooling over her everywhere she went."

Taking a few minutes to take all this in, Greg deduced, "So Patterson is a suspect, motivated by jealousy and anger."


Sush downed the last of her coffee, stood and responded with a simple "yep" like she wasn't answering a heavy question.



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Chapter 44

A day later, after taking off from work, Jade, Sush, and Hazel met at Greg's place after Greg had completed his chat session with Enora. Only when Enora had to say a sad goodbye and utter the routine "I love you" did Greg let the three in, replying, "I love you too, sweetheart. Sweet dreams. Talk to you tomorrow."

The words drew nothing out of Jade, who - like every maverick - knew who it was at the other end of the line, so he extracted his stuff and methodically arranged everything on the kitchen counter like it was just another evening after work; it shocked Hazel, who kept up with news and gossip of all kinds yet didn't know Greg already had someone; and as for Sush, who knew he said those words while letting them in on purpose - she shot him an annoyed glare which earned her his taunting smile when they both recalled their conversation from his car.

As Greg strode past her, his hand made the lightest touch on her lower back - one as delicate as an ethereal brush, softening her but confusing Hazel, who blinked with furrowed brows and finally found her voice when she said, "So... you have someone back home, Your Grace?"

Shooting Sush another glance with an upward tip of his lips, Greg mindlessly replied, "I do."

"Someone special?"

"More than special - important," Greg noted seriously, his smile gradually ebbed, now with arms crossed as he stood next to Jade, getting a cursory glance of the evidence on white sheets.

"Lucky girl," Hazel hummed.

Greg remained silent, not seeing the point in elaborating further. Those

who knew him and Enora would know he was the lucky one to share such a close bond with the pup. It was never the other way around. Not even close.

When the duke remained silent, Hazel shot Sush a perplexed look - one the chief didn't catch because her mind was already where Greg's was - with the evidence.

Greg and the mavericks had checked the diplomatic residence for bugs, cameras, wires or any other devices that would pose an invasion of privacy and found none. Which was good for the hunters and their government because it was a clause in the treaty that there should be no such installations. Planting anything was as unwise as it was lethal - the one who ordered it would be taken hostage, the ones who installed it would be killed - Clause 4.1.1.

The papers Jade was laying around contained all kinds things, from redacted documents to photographic evidence to witness testimonies.

"Where did they say they got these from again?" Hazel asked Sush in a whisper.

"Defense ministry," Sush responded nonchalantly, eyes never leaving the papers.

Eyes bulging out of their sockets, Hazel whisper-yelled, "They hacked into the defense ministry?"

"Under my orders, yes." Sush refrained from telling Hazel that Greg had already hacked into once before - before the months of negotiation and execution of the treaty.

Suppressing every instinct that was telling Hazel to scream in pure panic, she took a few breaths and made a beeline to the only two bottles of alcohol, taking a glass and opening a bottle without asking, pouring and downing the liquid in one sitting.

Sush's fingers plucked a printed picture, leaving a rectangular space between the surrounding sheets. It was a case from over a decade ago of a woman lying on grass, ginger hair sprawled but didn't cover the wide, empty eyes, a streak of red conspicuously trailed down her neck. The fine lines below the picture read: Porsha Delaware, aged 28, Octopus, 1:17 A.M.

Sush's fingers dragged another sheet next to the picture, describing how Delaware was captured by street cameras coming out of her house a little after 12:30 a.m., walking down two blocks, looking over her shoulder every few steps and pausing at a corner before turning to a back alley. No one was seen coming out until Delaware's corpse was found by a neighbor throwing out the trash. Inhabitants of nearby buildings said they heard no screams. Needless to say, no one saw Delaware's assailant.

Sush held onto both sheets in one hand longer than necessary and her fingers from her free hand had begun fiddling with her locket again.

Greg's bone of concern for her pulled him to the other side of the counter, his right shoulder behind her left, his breath fanning her ear as he studied the piece. Delaware carried a bag when she left the house, but no bag was found with the corpse. If Jade had gotten everything there was in this case, the bag had never been retrieved.

When Sush's lips pulled into a frown in a way that was demanding answers, she dropped the sheets back onto the counter and took a few steps to the left to study everything else, at which time Greg's hand snuck in another brush - this time along her waist.

Hazel had finally toned down her anxiety enough to be the fourth set of eyes she came to be, swirling her drink and assessing the redacted documents, trying to make sense of the chronology and - hopefully - finding a pattern.

The silence layered, deepened like an ocean. The ruffling and flipping papers were like the hum of the underwater current - fitting and natural. So when Jade's voice cut through the space, Hazel jumped in the high chair like there was going to be a shark attack, despite the hacker speaking at his usual volume, "This is just some of the shit I found. There's still a lot to fork through. I only picked out those with neck slashing and after-midnight murders so far. Gotta admit, I'm surprised."

"You and me both," Sush murmured.

When Hazel didn't make a sound, Greg prompted, "You've known about these, deputy?"

Hazel cut short her sipping to answer, "Yes. Zasper... uh, the former Chief Octopus was privy to these things so I was, too. Not many octopuses know the details, though. It's not just Sush. Zasper and the other chiefs, along with Valor and Ferdinand, agreed to keep things between the higher-ups, to avoid causing a panic."

Blinking at the stupidity of expecting ignorance to be bliss, Greg questioned, "And no one objected? Not one single deputy from the headquarters and the ministry?"

The judgment in his voice couldn't be clearer. The look in his eyes made one feel like an insect struggling in a futile attempt to scurry away.

Sush's elbow gently nudged at his chest, doubting he felt anything with that solid surface when she defended Hazel, "Before the Delilah et al. conspiracy, no one spoke against those above them. It wasn't just Hazel. It was all of us, myself included."

In a softer tone that held zero judgment, he noted, "You were not the deputy."

She shrugged. "I wouldn't have done it either even if I were. Being naive, we saw it as a matter of respect, of having faith that our superiors knew best. We were told about one of our own being sacrificed and had to

tighten and improve security measures but all of us held back asking the whys, only focused on the hows. We didn't go all out arguing that - without knowing the whys - the hows we come up with would be reasonable at best and useless at worst. Whenever a final decision has been made, we almost never question them, not until very recently."

Knowing that Sush was only saying this to get him to stop attacking Hazel, Greg huffed, "Fine."

Dropping the matter, they drew the similarities they could find. All victims were young: Porsha Delaware, twenty-eight, a western octopus, from over a decade ago; Regina and Austin Chen, twenty-six, fraternal twins and western chameleons from seven years back; and Shahrul Ibrahim, twenty-nine, another octopus, though from the east.

The second thing found was that their laptops and phones were never retrieved. Only the Chen twins had a desktop back at their place and the octopuses who investigated at that time didn't find anything out of the ordinary. It was just work files synced to their computer the same way every hunter would have on their personal devices.

The jarring detail was these deaths seemed targeted, unlike the one with the six archers from the east, whose communication devices remained intact and with them after the attack.

Were the after-midnight killings from the past related to the recent murders in the east? Or were they separate crimes of their own?

Who was that person in a beanie? And did Delaware, Ibrahim and the Chens stumble upon something that someone wanted to keep under lock and key, even if it meant shutting them up for good?

By the end of the night, they were nowhere closer to getting where they hoped to be when they started, calling it a night and hoping Jade would find something else soon, something leading them to the assailant.

Chapter 45

The octopuses completed the screening Valor asked for within a week. Hunters were either relocated, given more team members or reassigned completely. They sent a formal request to the government, urging them to improve communication systems in remote areas. Once Ferdinand shared the horrors of Catrine Carter's death, the motion to see through the hunters' request received a unanimous vote.

There was some noise made by a member of the opposition party, a young woman named Joyce Clearwater, who promptly reminded the house that her party had made those recommendations several times before but was brushed aside by the leading party, using this opportunity to argue that the leading party would never take precautions seriously until the people suffered "in the most tragic manner". Despite the slurs that went on for a few minutes after that, the result was the same - improve communication systems where Catrine Carter died.

Clearwater's words were drowned out by the support that the leading party obtained following that motion. The media captured the story of how many civilians praised the government's effort, of how - despite the small populations - their welfare was not neglected. The president and many other government officials credited Ferdinand for the success, and only those behind the scenes knew it was hunters headquarters who deserved the commendation.

Seeing Ferdinand in a video with that empty political smile, shaking hands and saying "thank you" like a broken record, Greg almost gagged with his animal. He would've marked the video as being irrelevant had something not slip - Ferdinand's face. He was composed in an epitome of a leader at first, but as his face turned away from the cameras, Greg spotted something in the old man's eye - impatience and discomfort,

maybe even a little fear.

Heaving a frustrated sigh, Greg pulled the video progress bar all the way back to the left and rewatched it - muted this time - and that was when he saw it - how Ferdinand's head swung left to right as soon as he stepped out of his chauffeured car, three bodyguards equally wary. The minister's grim line only pulled into a smile when he saw the first cameras, but faltered just slightly when he locked eyes with Clearwater, who was pulling an equally hypocritical act.

For the next few hours, Greg pulled up old videos of the minister, quickly realizing he used to only have one bodyguard and never bothered to look anywhere beyond his field of vision, less so if it required him turning his head. Greg ran through the dates of each video, and found the two extra bodyguards came several months back... sometime after he killed Izabella.

Strange.

Was the minister worried that the lycans would go after him in the course of the interspecies negotiation? Why would he be worried about that? When Jade and several other mavericks infiltrated the conspirators' communications, it was deduced that the ones involved were the ones they eventually killed, no more.

"Hey, you alright?" the world's most beautiful voice stroked his eardrums as a tall cup of coffee came near his hand.

Sush's fingers only left the cup for a brief moment when Greg swiftly grabbed them, smiling to himself as he watched his thumb tracing her finger pads. Eyes trailing the length of brown skin up to her face, he uttered, "Oddly, I'm feeling much better."

Sush's eyes narrowed but she didn't take her hand away, so Greg held onto it, beaming brighter as Sush pointed out, "In case you haven't noticed, it's lunch hour. But you seem busy. I could grab you

something. What do you want to have?"

Greg's eyes snapped to his watch and he shot up from his seat, realizing the floor was almost empty. Taking the coffee and getting a quick sip, he then pointed at the elevator. "Let's go."

"What were you doing anyway?" Sush questioned once they were in the elevator. He handed her his phone with the screen unlocked. Sush scrolled through his search history and noted in mock ignorance, "Fanboying Ferdinand. I should have known. That whole asshole persona the other day was just your nerves talking."

With an arrogant smirk, his hand snuck around her back as he uttered in a deep rumble, "Nerves, as I understand, can go two ways - two opposing ways, either with fear or audacity." His hand on her back trailed downward, testing the waters as his fingers brushed across her butt in a slow, teasing touch. In a seductive whisper, he said, "I hope I won't have to stipulate which of the two I'm more inclined to embrace."

His animal got increasingly cocky when they felt her inched closer to his palm while her eyes tried to focus on the list of videos she was still scrolling through on his phone, strategically avoiding making eye contact. As his lycan released a coy growl, his human's lips tipped higher and he murmured, "I'm not sure how an octopus's nerves work, but I plan to find out." When his hand covered one of her buttcheeks, holding it and feeling its softness and warmth, she released a soft sigh that quickly turned into a gasp at his sudden, rough squeeze.

Their eyes met and the haughtiness that he wore obnoxiously well tied strings around her heart, hauling her to him with the upward crook of his lips.

Sush only broke free from his gaze when the elevator bell dinged, and she slammed his phone into his chest as his fingers brushed over hers before walking out. The Chief Octopus pressed back a smile and

ignored the looks she was getting for the conspicuous glow on her face, a vast difference from the murderous energy she used to walk around with. Greg tailed her and kept his hands to himself, pulling the straight face a little more successfully than she did, though the mavericks could still see the difference in him.

It was easier to keep his lips in a line the moment he saw they were headed to a table with some of the mavericks and the Traffic Cone. Goddess, he wished he could mind-link his octopus, but he had a feeling she understood the meaning behind the exhausted look he was giving her, because of the way she smirked. He practically shook his head like she'd just sent him to hell.

"Oh yeah, the scandal was HUGE." Hazel was in the middle of sharing an old gossip with the mavericks - Ella, Jade, and Lexton. Another octopus, Amara, filled in gaps if Hazel left any, but mostly stayed quiet, letting Hazel expand on the tale. Hazel droned on, "There was even an actual meeting of whether cameras should be installed in the male restroom."

Jade and Lexton flinched and exchanged glances. They didn't think to check when they used the restrooms. And it had been weeks!

Hazel chuckled. "Relax, it didn't get approved, though it would've been funny."

Lexton shook his head, dragging out his reply to emphasize his, "No.", almost mortified despite the long list of other less legal things he'd done that made a normal creature find more mortifying.

No one at the table - or at the cafeteria, for that matter - was blind to the way Greg and Sush were stealing glances of one another, sometimes catching each other's gaze, sometimes not, despite there being no words passed between them. It was as if their eyes spoke, speaking a language that only they could understand.


The mavericks had come to terms that their boss was now deep in with the Chief Octopus, and only hoped what they intended to tell him next wouldn't be seen as an attempt to crush his fantasy but one to keep him and the rest of them safe.



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