


The Indomitable Huntress And the Hardened Duke Novel

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Chapter 46

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The cafeteria was almost vacant. And the moment Sush stood, Greg and the others followed suit, which was when Ella said, "Boss, we have a report from the kingdom." It was practically code for "we have information about the hunters that we cannot say in front of the hunters".

His hand instinctively went to Sush's lower back again in a light graze, murmuring "see you later" into her ear and sank back into his seat as Sush, Hazel, and Amara left them to it. Vix and Baxter came and slid into the empty seats, and their group link began.

Jade started, 'Boss, the defense ministry knows we're hacking.'

Greg's gaze turned fierce, wary.

'We think someone leaked,' the main hacker added.

After a long pause, noting the faces around him that seemed to want to tell him something yet was considering holding back, Greg questioned, 'And you think it's the chief?' His tone came out more as a warning for Jade to think carefully before answering, though it wasn't intended to be that way, so while Jade swallowed a lump in his throat, his boss added, 'Let's get one thing straight: she asked for those files to be hacked. It makes no sense for her to leak.'

'Would it make sense for Hazel to leak it, though? She was there that night with you and Jade,' Ella ventured.

Baxter, Vix and Lexton were helping Jade with the bulk, so Baxter answered, 'We ain't got no proof of either of 'em leakin' but it freaky the tops changed codes and systems one week after boss and Jade had that thing with the chief and dep.'

'Excuse me?' Greg's brows rose, then eyeing Jade, he said, 'You still haven't answered my question. Is there a reason to suspect the chief?'

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Jade considered his words, then harrumphed even though he was using the mind-link. 'She is not dropped from the suspect list.'

Those words had the effect of shattering every bit of hope stitched into the broken parts of the duke's heart, his soul. It was only then he realized that he'd been hoping to mark her, claim her, make her his. Greg didn't know when this yearning began but he was already in the middle of it. Again. He'd even shown her Enora's picture. What was he thinking? His face grew dark, serious.

'Elaborate.' It was all Greg could think of saying after pulling himself together.

Jade explained, 'If the chief isn't... on our side, she could be asking us to hack to enhance their own systems. She may have people with innovation skills who'll pick us up when we hack. I checked the last time the defense ministry changed their systems. Guess what? It was when they set it up. They'd never changed it. Not until last night. But...' something in that last word injected hopefulness in the duke, who had to remind himself to not celebrate too soon.

If Sush was a threat, he'd have to put an end to the bullshit fantasies that seemed to be spiraling out of control in his mind and body. His wants would always come second to keeping Enora safe. This was something that was never going to change. He wouldn't let anyone hurt the pup, not even the woman he was falling for, especially not the woman he was falling for.

Jade continued, 'But this is wholly speculation, Boss. And I'd be lying if I don't say my skepticism is caused by the post-traumatic event of... Ugly Deli.'

Greg instructed all mavericks to use that name whenever they had to bring up Izabella. And it fitted the dead chameleon perfectly, he thought. Ugly intentions. Ugly heart. Ugly end. His little sweetheart was a true genius.

Ella turned to Jade, giving him a look of uncertainty. 'Sush isn't like that one, though. Not in a lot of ways.'

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Turning to her, Jade argued, 'Don't you find it weird she looked completely fine after the six murders in the east but flipped when there was ONE death here in the west? You don't suspect her reaction to the western death could have been an act? At all?'

'That's different!' Ella insisted. 'The ones in the east were more Kenji's responsibility than it was hers. The systems and correspondences show Sush only acknowledged changes and decisions. She may be his superior in name, but Kenji had a lot of leeway before the murders. It makes sense for him to have taken the deaths harder. And Sush wasn't left unscathed after returning from the east, hastening the other octopuses like she'd set them on fire if they slowed down, and reviewing and re-reviewing codes and systems like a maniac herself before the Catrine Carter death became a more morbid distraction.'

'She didn't look the least shaken. For six,' Jade reminded, comfortable with his own stance.

'Didn't you guys mention she looked tired but gave orders wide awake in the east?' Vix interrupted, then shrugged, 'Maybe she was shocked. Maybe the shock kept her awake.'

'She. Wasn't. Shaken,' Jade repeated for the umpteenth time.

Greg's voice, cold and calm, cut into the discussion when he asked, 'Was the deputy shaken?'

Everyone turned to Vix, Baxter and Lexton, who remained at headquarters when the rest of them were in the east.

'Kinda.'

'Less chatty that morning.'

'Girl kept checkin' her phone and typin', especially after lunch.'

'Did she speak to anyone about it?' Greg questioned.

The three looked between themselves when Vix said, 'She could've. We weren't near her station to eavesdrop, Boss.'

Exhaling in a long, disapproving sigh, Greg continued, 'Do you three at

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least remember who she spoke to?’

Vix knew that. ‘Amara, Liena, Teddy, and Holden.’

‘That’s it?’ Greg’s brows rose again. ‘That chatterbox spoke to only four people the whole day?’

‘The rest were our people, Boss,’ Vix clarified.

Turning to Jade, Greg ordered, ‘Hack into the deputy’s phone. I want to know what she was checking, seeing the chief was either on the plane or too occupied with Mr. Sophisticated and the eastern octopuses to be sending Traffic Cone messages.’

Jade nodded slowly, hoping there was another order succeeding that - one that involved the chief.

Greg read his face and stated, ‘Cursory search of the chief only.’ His chest constricted even while still issuing the order. His animal was getting him to retract the order already. Ignoring the beast, Greg added, ‘If you find nothing from that preliminary search, drop it. DO NOT expand. For now. If something comes up in the deputy’s phone connecting to the chief, we expand. But not yet.’

‘Duly noted, Boss,’ Jade murmured.

Greg stood, which was when he recalled something. ‘Tristan, I need you to run through Catrine Carter’s background. The chief mentioned her public status was single after Larson. I want to know her private status. Pull up her accounts, email, physical mail if there are any. I don’t care how you do it - hack or ask without raising suspicions.’

‘I’ll get to it.’

They were back in the trenches an hour past lunch. The moment Greg exited the elevator, his eyes locked with Sush. The tug of her lips was as beautiful as it was painful.

Could this all have been another ploy? Another lie?

Bringing himself to remember she was still a suspect and he had a role to play, his lips curled up in the coquettish way he’d looked at her in the

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elevator and at the cafeteria when they were alone the other day, tearing his eyes away and heading for his station before he lost its bearing.

Little did he know he didn't fool Sush, who instinctively felt the difference in his smile. The ones before were deep and heated - one that hid something and drew her in, tempting her to explore. This one when he came out of the elevator seemed... hollow. Even forced. There was no tantalizing enigma, just a stone wall.

Her eyes scanned the mavericks who stayed past lunch with him as she wondered what could've happened, not knowing that - next to her - Hazel was watching her perplexity with an equally curious face.



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