

Chapter 51

The fact that Greg didn't use Hazel's nickname was not a good sign.

"What about her?" Sush asked, though - as her mind recalled there being suspects earlier - she already had a good idea of what was coming next.

Swallowing a lump in his throat, he disclosed, "Jade found things on her encrypted phone. Sh—"

Sush's eyes drew shut and her hand held up to a stop sign when she interjected, "Pause right there. Her what?"

Greg stared at her for a good second before murmuring under his breath, "Well, at least we know the encrypted phone isn't common knowledge."

"It's not," Sush stated like it was obvious. "The only one we know with such a thing is Valor. Not even the chiefs have one."

Greg's brows shot to his hair at the mention of the commander. "That is... insightful. Who does Valor communicate with on that thing?"

"We assume it's for receiving orders from the higher-ups in the defense ministry."

"So Ferdinand?"

"I don't know. Maybe? I don't think it's exclusively him, though. Ferdinand isn't the only one privy to top secret files."

Greg hm-ed, taking note and thought of recruiting Vix, Baxter and Lexton to help Jade. The pool was getting bigger.

"So what did Jade find?" she asked charily.

Offering her his full attention now, he replied, "He hasn't cracked everything just yet, but from everything he's found so far, she's communicating with someone in coded messages, though we can't pinpoint who it is. There are a few segments to it: something about Great Horned Owls being sacrificed while the Rat - with a capital R - is let off from above, and the plan would work because the other rats wouldn't know how to save the owls." Greg's perplexity was shared with Sush, who was getting confused and frustrated. He added, "Last I checked, rats were lower down the food chain, hence are more likely to celebrate if their predators are sacrificed. Why is this going against that?"

As her brain stared at the mental wall that announced her dead end, she asked, "What are the rest of it? Maybe there's a bigger picture we're not seeing yet."

"Data leaked when the sun rose."

"What?" her eyes squinted like the sun was piercing her eyes when they were actually in an enclosed space with four opaque walls.

Helplessly, Greg noted, "Sush, I really should be the one to ask that question. I'm new here."

Her finger jabbed at his chest and her brows knitted in disagreement. "You've been here for almost a month. You're not new. Data leaked when the sun rose?" She threw her hands in the air. "Data can leak anytime! God! What else?"

Greg recalled the last bit, "The hyenas coming for those who are left."

Sush exhaled, frustration hitting its peak that she wanted to scream so badly. Deep breath, Sush. Deep breath, she told herself. "Hyenas? Really? Where are we? In a dessert? I must have missed the sand and the heatwaves in the years I've been here."

"Maybe it's not really the animals but a specific group of them. She did

say 'the' hyenas, not a pack in general."

"And that makes it so much clearer and more logical," Sush retorted, though Greg didn't take her sarcasm to heart. If anything, it made him smile. Wrapping herself with one arm because her other hand was still with Greg, she stared at the floor, contemplating, then muttering her thoughts aloud, "Asking Hazel wouldn't be the best move."

Greg considered, then his lips tilted when he said, "It may be. After all, you've mentioned that your preferred approach is ask—ow." He acknowledged her elbow to his chest in a monotonous tone but an affectionate smile. The blow wasn't even a blow, more like a prompt to not wipe it in her face by shoving her own words back at her.

Sush continued thinking. "And we can't ask or tell Valor in case he's on the other end of the line."

"About that - are there physical archives in his office that are not kept in the digital cloud?"

She blinked, swallowing the 'no' that was at the tip of her tongue. She used to be sure it was no, but now... "I didn't think there were at first but... I've personally never looked through the papers in his office. I'm not sure if Hazel has. But before me, Zasper Zavier did, I think. He used to joke about how losing Valor's office to a fire would be more tragic than losing Valor himself because Valor wouldn't be able to remember everything in those files passed down from one commander to the next. I used to think it was only for good humor. But Valor never really laughed. He smiled to be amiable because Ferdinand and the others from the ministry found it funny. Maybe Valor just didn't want to cause a scene."

Greg considered their options and urged, "Sush, we need to get those files. Something about the Catrine Carter death doesn't seem right. And it's not just the fact that she was murdered in a remote location. I think

her death was only a piece of the puzzle."

"You're saying Hazel, Valor... if they're communicating, they're other pieces of the same puzzle?"

"Maybe, maybe not. Until we have more to go on, I can't be sure. None of us can be."

"So what do we do with Hazel? Report her? Suspend and confine her until investigations are complete?"

"That may not be wise, Sush. The last thing we need is our only link to the big picture be assassinated like Carter. We don't want to bury the only lead we have for now."

Sush nodded in agreement. "No Hazel. No Valor. Definitely no Ferdinand. Abbott is loyal to a fault to authority - to Valor and the defense ministry. And Patterson's just..." She sighed, already exhausted at thinking about the other chief. "So I'm basically playing detective alone."

Tugging her closer by her hand, his thick brows dipped and his eyes channeled a promise when he uttered, "You're not alone, Sush. You never will be. I'm here."

A quiet moment passed before she found her voice. "I was talking about the hunters but..." she trailed off when his stroking of the back of her hand pulled her gaze to their hands, and she uttered, "Thank you." Lifting her face to meet his smiling eyes, she added in a tease, "And it's nice to know the so-called black sheep of the royal family isn't all black."

Those words and that smile drew out his coquettish smirk. His hands naturally found her bum, pinning her against him as her hands steadied herself against his chest. He closed in on her ear and murmured, "I've grown out of that fleece in recent years." His voice, deep and sultry, accelerated her heart rate.

His lips traced the shell of her ear, following the curve before the tip of his tongue glided across her earlobe, eliciting her sigh and soft moan, the faint scent of arousal entered his nostrils when he added, "The black fleece became a little too... tight." His crotch pushed against his zipper and was now pressed against Sush's thigh. Her arousal intensified and he could almost picture the moisture between her folds, making his mouth water.

As his hands massaged her butt in unhurried, sensuous motions, he continued, "I'm not anything the media says anymore, my octopus." The magic of the last two words weakened her knees, making her melt into him like butter on toast.

In an alluring whisper, he continued, "I'm not a lycan in sheep's clothing. Though... I must admit: I'm the most morally reprehensible royal you'll meet, using deplorable methods and taking them to the very extreme." His emphasis on the last word was slow, seductive. His lips trailed along her jaw and reached the corner of her lips, where he declared, "I've never bothered borrowing a sheep's clothing, Sush. I've always worn everything that represents me, showing who I am. With pride."

It should sound arrogant. In a usual setting - a less confined setting with his hands not on her butt and his mouth not caressing her face - it would have sounded arrogant. But those words - especially the last words - heated Sush even further, escalating her need for him, her restraint weakening by the minute, his piercing gaze challenging her thinning walls.

Sush heard the alarm bells in her head, telling her that she needed to come clean with him about who she was and what she was up to before they took things further, but she blurred out the sirens and warnings, wanting to soak into the moment and deal with the repercussions later.

Their noses brushed, breaths mingled. The surface of his lips touched

hers, and his eyes chose this time to glaze over.


He was going to kill someone.



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