

Chapter 53

"I was in a meeting with the defense ministry," Valor disclosed in his office, his voice speaking for his displeasure at Sush's tone when she demanded to know his whereabouts during the attack.

Sush and Greg had easily deciphered most of the animal code from Hazel's secret correspondence after the catastrophe. The Great Horned Owls was code for the archers, sacrificed. Rat with a capital R being let off from above? Sush herself, let off from above when the elevator malfunctioned. She and Greg speculated that his presence in the elevator was most likely not considered since he forced himself in at the last minute.

The next code - other rats wouldn't know how to save the owls - meant no octopus knew how to save the archers. Because none of them knew the codes. The next one - data leaked when the sun rose - took them a little more time, but they eventually figured it out. The sun rose from the east. Data that someone didn't want being found had been leaked from the attack in the east. The only uncrackable code left was the one with the hyenas.

They kept the codes between themselves and the mavericks, not knowing which other hunter to trust at present, especially when even the commander himself didn't seem as faze as they expected him to be.

Patterson, for once, wasn't defending Valor either, but his voice managed to hide his anger slightly better than Sush when he questioned , "Didn't you receive the countless calls and messages from us, Commander? No one else had the codes."

Although taken aback, Valor replied, "Communication devices have never been allowed behind those doors. They don't want us to be

recording the meeting in secret, nor do they want to risk having hackers listening to our discussion. Alagumalai and Abbott always had the codes. The recent mishap has taken place in an unforeseeable circumstance."

"Mishap?" Sush's whisper may have taken away the volume but it didn't take away her infuriation. Kenji even subconsciously took a step away from her as she unleashed her wrath with the same fire in her eyes whenever she barged into his office during the four-month negotiation. "Fifty-two archers are dead, Valor. Dead. Thirty-six are incapacitated. Sixteen are in a coma, including their chief AND deputy. The inventory rooms and poison chamber had been encroached into. No one even knows who brought in zahar or how it was snuck into the headquarters then to the archers' floors, undetected. Cameras around the entire headquarters had clearly been hacked to stop us from finding the culprit. A mishap? Do you even know how dire our situation is? Do you even know what this means?"

Her hands pressed on his table as she leaned in and delivered the verdict, "With no defender left here, we'd have to call back at least half of those at the borders. The archers would be spread thin, increasingly the likelihood of more of them dying from attacks like the one in the east. Someone is challenging our defenses and they are succeeding. This is a ploy, Valor. Not a mishap."

After a long moment of uncomfortable silence, no one coming to the commander's rescue, Valor asked, "And what do you want me to do, hm? Stand in their place and guard the border?"

"That would be ideal," she said without showing any signs of wavering. "Except you'd lose all functionality if I chopped you up into several pieces and assigned each part of you across our borders."

Kenji bit the inner walls of his mouth at her response, knowing it wasn't an ideal time to find anything amusing and was telling himself that

Sush wasn't joking. Patterson glanced at the ceiling then out the window, fully comprehending the consequences but not seeing a solution just yet. Greg, who stood at the far left, couldn't help his lips from tilting upward as his crossed arms loosen and thumbs hooked to his pants pockets.

Valor's patience snapped. He stood from behind his desk, forehead carrying waves of frustration when he challenged, "And you think I'm not doing anything? When this reached Ferdinand, the first person he blamed was you."

Greg's spine straightened, prepared to engage in violence yet still trying to convince himself that Sush didn't need his help. This was her turf, her boss, her fight.

Sush's eyes widened in further fury, the control over her volume now gone with Valor's outburst. "I was trapped in a fucking elevator that chose that exact time to malfunction!"

"Exactly. Ferdinand said you may have staged it to deflect suspicions off yourself!"

"That's incredibly logical since I wouldn't be a suspect if I'm dead!"

"The point is, Alagumalai, you didn't die. And you had a protector with you to shield you from death." Valor motioned at Greg.

The duke promptly said, "I barged in at the eleventh hour, right before the doors closed behind her. Getting stuck and almost dying was definitely not part of the plan."

Valor explained, treading more cautiously, "I understand, Your Grace, which is why..." his sights returned to Sush. "...I've told Ferdinand you couldn't have been the culprit. You had nothing to gain. And His Grace's presence was most likely due to something in the treaty. The minister was going to use this instance to dismiss you, Alagumalai. Not just from the octopuses, but from the hunters entirely. I saved your ass!"