

Chapter 55

The hunter-lycan gala was a once a year affair, attended by the highest officials from both sides. Xandar and Lucy attended every alternate year, taking turns with Christian and Annie. Although guised as an event to raise funds for equipment and manpower to train new recruits and solidify the public image that everything was well and good with the neighboring kingdom, the attendees knew full well it was a show. Behind the cameras and smiles, both species had still been keeping to themselves to a significant extent.

It had been exactly three days since the call was made and the lycan and wolves had begun standing guard. Because of the "generous contribution from the kingdom" the media reported, Ferdinand - who attended once every three to four years - had to show his face at the gala this year despite having already attended the previous year.

The stench of the animals was just awful, the minister thought as he stepped through the doors, despite the empty smile that he wore so well. His gaze swept the place before Valor came forward to greet him. The commander nodded to his left, gesturing toward the smiling queen chatting with an archer and the brooding king with a hand around her waist - half listening, half assessing the increasingly crowded room, nodding at acquaintances and curious faces, glaring at ones staring hungrily at his mate.

"They'd expect a personal thanks," Valor noted the obvious.

Ferdinand released a subtle exasperated sigh, dragged his feet, held his smile as he approached the lycan rulers, internally cursing the unwanted baggage that his position came with.

The king noticed him first, who returned the minister's feigned welcoming gaze with a less welcoming one of his own as his lips made the lightest contact with the queen's temple before the couple's eyes

glazed over. Lucy's smile withered when she wrapped up her conversation with the archer, who noticed her boss and boss's boss striding over and quickly excused herself.

"Your Majesties, so good of you to join us," Ferdinand began.

Lucy mirrored his empty smile. "Good of you too, minister."

It was as if Ferdinand and Valor's presence alerted the rulers' allies. Toby, Ella, Phelton, and Greg stood close by, far enough not to be intrusive but near enough to defend the royal couple if and when it was needed.

Ferdinand looked past the queen's shade regarding his infrequent attendance to the annual event, and proceeded to get his words out so he could call it a night, "On behalf of the government and the hunters, allow me to convey our most sincere thanks for the warriors offered to secure our borders. I assure you, their presence is merely temporary and we are more than happy to discuss a way to repay this debt."

"In that case," Lucy began, which brought a look out of the minister, his deputy, and the commander, a look that said, "Oh no." Those last few words were merely meant to convey an empty promise, a well-rehearsed political line that was never meant to be taken literally. The queen obviously knew this and clearly didn't care when she continued with a snarl, "Make sure you're doing everything within reach and beyond to find the culprit. We offered two hundred warriors. We expect to get two hundred in return."

Nodding in comprehension but with zero empathy, Ferdinand replied, "I feel you, Your Majesty. They will be cared for as if they were our own."

Xandar's face grew darker and his tone grew firm, "If that's the treatment our people are getting from you, we're insisting on greater care and more substantial hastening on the part of the ministry and the rest of the government. The ministry AND the rest of the government, Ferdinand. Not just the hunters. The last thing we want is to have you 'care' for our people the way you do yours, seeing that security structures weren't even disclosed to the ones managing security."

Xandar was referring to the metal walls that concealed the archers' floors which ended up trapping everyone. It was built long before this generation but was never utilized. Which was why no present day hunter knew about it, and no precautionary measures were taken to install an escape route in case their own people were trapped. They were lucky that the codes to remove the walls were the same as the codes to access the emergency doors on the archer floors.

Ferdinand nodded once more, his voice lost strength and the smile lost stamina. "That was a very grave error on our part, I admit."

"Admission is crucial but insufficient, minister," Lucy noted, swallowing back another snarl. She still couldn't get over the fact that so many hunters were sacrificed, pausing for quite awhile in pure shock the other day when Greg linked her with the news. Those weren't her people, but she still felt something heavy pulling her to the ground as she imagined the countless families that would be mourning their losses. That night, after putting the pups into bed with Xandar, she sat in his lap for about an hour, neither one of them said anything as they allowed their sorrow flow through each other.

Now, taking a step toward the minister and commander, Lucy warned, "If any of our warriors retain a scratch, know that the two of you would retain a similar laceration: across the face, along the neck, through the heart, whichever is appropriate depending on the severity of their injuries. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Ferdinand's and Valor's responses came out in an unexpected synchronicity that a bystander would have interpreted it as a declaration of subordination, out of instinct if not out of fear.

The two men exchanged disapproving glances before Ferdinand forced another smile and said, "Your Majesties, I can assure you we take the attack very seriously. The lives lost won't be forgotten and it serves as a reminder to keep our defenders informed. The motion on compensating the affected families will be tabled tomorrow - the very first thing on our agenda. And the second issue is with regards to the borders. The entire

day is dedicated to keeping the hunters and your people safe.”

Xandar used this opportunity to deliver a reminder, “We look forward to receiving the details of the discussion.”

Ferdinand’s brows knitted, forehead creased, failing to understand. As Greg scoffed darkly from the side, Valor murmured to the minister, “Clause 10.1 in the agreement, minister - the kingdom is entitled to the minutes of every discussion and decision involving hunters.”

“Ah,” Ferdinand noted like he’d just remembered when he didn’t recall such bullshit of a clause. Still, he turned back to the rulers, uttering, “Our people will send you a copy as soon as possible.”

Lucy knew this game. “Minister, I’m inclined to remind you that - per the treaty - nothing should be redacted. And the details should reach us within twenty-four hours post-discussion, in case those particular details had slipped your mind.”

Although Ferdinand didn’t appreciate being caught in his tactical maneuver to avoid having to divulge his country’s affairs with the kingdom, he somehow managed to say, “I appreciate the reminder, Your Majesties. And many thanks for the aid provided.”

He offered them an obligatory nod and left before more complaints followed while his deputy, Agu, stayed a few more moments to convey his own gratitude with much more sincerity than his superior.

Since that was over, Greg lifted his wrist to check the time, then extracted his phone and tapped a number on his speed dial with furrowed brows. At the second beep, he caught sight of a vision of beauty walking through the entrance. And his heart stopped.



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