

## Chapter 59

"Come, darling." The queen's voice, loud and jubilant, filled with just the right level of hypocrisy and a shard of scorn sucked all attention away from the Red Devil. Hands gently tugging her husband's bicep with a mischievous smile, Lucy announced, "It's time to join the show: this ministerial-organized circus."

The human ministers flinched, Ferdinand included - a sight witnessed by the majority of the room. The Ferdinands' forced smiles withered. The only difference was that Larissa's smile withered under the spotlight, her mask falling a little too long.

With bright eyes and a broad smile, Xandar bowed low and offered his wife his hand like he was still courting her, knowing the game she was playing as he responded with a glint in his eye that matched hers, "Yes, wouldn't want to disappoint the ringmasters... I mean, government ministers."

"What a careless blunder, my love," Lucy playfully reprimanded.

Placing a kiss on her hand before pulling her in, he uttered loud enough for everyone to hear as they continued putting on their own show, "Forgive me, my little freesia. I hope you understand that animals take a little more time to keep up."

As Lucy chuckled, Toby - who stood nearer to the Ferdinands - offered Ella his hand and chimed, "Something to look forward to reading in the news tomorrow."

Ella placed her hand into his and built on his efforts, "I wonder if someone has to step down after this."

Her husband shrugged. "Eh, we'll know by the end of the week. Not our problem. We're just here to perform."

As the hunters themselves randomly paired up and joined the show,

effectively making a statement that they sided with the Chief Octopus over the minister's wife - with even Agu offering his hand to a random huntress and everyone began filling up the dance floor - Ferdinand snatched the microphone from his wife and signaled for the music to stop. If the king's and queen's words got out - words implying that there had been disrespect initiated by his own wife - Ferdinand would be submitting his resignation within the next forty-eight hours.

Apologetic and directed to the lycan rulers, Ferdinand eked out a smile and said, "Your Majesties, there appears to be a misunderstanding. I'm quite sure what my lovely wife meant was... it's wonderful to see our species interacting. In harmony."

"What a lovely set of words from your lovely wife," Lucy replied sardonically, not even needing the microphone to be heard, to make the minister and his wife cower before her from a distance.

Ferdinand chuckled awkwardly. Lonelily. After clearing his throat twice while trying not to crumble under the queen's glare and the king's scowl, the old man swallowed a lump in his throat and uttered, "On behalf of my wife, I apologize, Your Majesties." Turning to Greg, he continued, "Your Grace." Seeing Greg's opening mouth and his hand that never left the octopus's waist, Ferdinand quickly added, "And you too, Alagumalai."

Wow, that was a first, Sush thought. She didn't care if this was a show anymore. She liked being in it, loving how it was playing out.

Ferdinand handed the microphone back to his wife, gripping her arm and muttering something into her ear with a sternness that only she could hear.

The Red Devil's chest heaved as her eyes closed, and when they reopened, the pair stared at each other like it was agreed how much was at stake before Larissa turned back to the crowd with feigned remorse. "Your Grace, Ms. Alagumalai, my poor choice of words have been... uncalled for." Shooting her husband a microsecond look at the last two words he insisted she used, she then continued in her empty smile, "The night is to celebrate peace. It always has been. Never was it

a show of performance.”

“Oh, that’s a relief.” Lucy continued with a smile challenging Larissa’s own. “And when are we going to see you on the dance floor celebrating peace with us, Larissa? Or are government ministers and their spouses exempted from having to participate in performances that they force others into?”

All eyes pinned on the woman in red, and not in a good way. Amongst each other, the hunters were making bets - half said that Larissa would give a half-believable excuse to wriggle out of having to put on a show; the other half saying she’d be obliged to put it on since the kingdom had just offered their help, so refusing the queen wouldn’t look good politically.

Ferdinand snatched the microphone back from his wife’s hands, not trusting her to utter a politically safe sentence without going through his filter. “We support no form of coercion but we do support our allegiance , Your Majesty. My wife and I will be joining everyone in the center shortly.”

The minister then offered his wife his hand which she accepted with a forced smile.

Interesting, many in the room thought as the hunters who lost the bet groaned.

While leading the way, Ferdinand mindlessly slammed the microphone into a random man’s chest, thinking it was someone who’d take care of it. The problem arose when this random man was Giovanni Patterson, who didn’t appreciate being treated like a punching bag even if it was just one punch by a microphone that didn’t feel like a punch.

First, his name had to be on the accountability paper of Catrine Carter’s death that he felt he had no fault in causing. Then, he lost six chameleons to metal walls and a poison that the minister and commander conveniently never mention. Now, as Chief Chameleon, he was being treated like someone Ferdinand could just dump things onto?

Oh, no, no, no. Call him petty but that was the last straw. Even ass-kissing has its limits.

Patterson tossed the microphone to the person-in-charge and took brusque steps toward the Ferdinands, motioning his clueless deputy to join him. The Chief Chameleon brought himself before Larissa, bringing her hand to his lips and brushed a kiss, all while looking at her with a coy smile.

Larissa, though briefly shocked, seemed to be enjoying the attention.

Right before Ferdinand spoke, Patterson's deputy, Mary Brown, joined them - vaguely guessing what she was going to be asked to do, already dreading it.

Patterson beamed bright, hiding the offense he took with Ferdinand treating him like a random servant, and suggested with a diplomatic smile, "Since Mrs. Ferdinand has said this is a night to celebrate not just our relationship with the neighboring species but also between the ministry and hunters, how about we see that our dance partners reflect that notion, minister?"

Patterson knew the last thing the minister wanted was to be dragged onto the dance floor, which would stop him from leaving earlier than he wanted to, so this was exactly what Patterson was giving him. If he kept the minister's wife throughout the night, the minister himself would be forced to stay for that long as well.

Petty. Pointless in the larger scheme of things. But effective nonetheless.

Mary Brown didn't blink when Patterson whispered into her ear, "I'm cashing in the debt you owe me. I entertained the duke last time. It's your turn to entertain the minister."

With that, her lips curled into a practiced smile as her chief pulled away and instructed audibly, "Go easy on the minister, Brown. He may be a little rusty."

His deputy turned to Ferdinand, gracious and ready. "Nothing I can't

handle, I'm sure."

Ferdinand knew better than to refuse, especially after the way this man - whom he couldn't recall the name to - phrased things the way he did.

Guiding Larissa away as the music began, Patterson behaved as if he was on an assignment, speaking alluringly, "I'm sorry to have stolen you from your husband, Mrs. Ferdinand. I can tell I'm a far cry from the minister as a partner."

To his surprise, which he successfully kept to himself, Larissa's hands boldly slid up his muscular chest and rested around his collar when she whispered, "Don't sell yourself short, handsome."


He recognized the look in her eye from his years as a chameleon, and he had to admit it was something he didn't expect.



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## Chapter 60

The sight of Patterson and Larissa was too much for Greg to refrain from speaking, making him murmur by Sush's temple, "What is he up to?"

Sush followed his gaze, then shrugged as her head leaned into him while they swayed to the slow melody. "To hell if I know what goes through his mind."

Greg's eyes returned to her, hand reaching for her chin, bringing her face up, gazing into her eyes. "I hope you know what goes through my mind."

One brow lifted and she taunted, "I thought we've established we're both not mind-readers."

Lips twitching, he uttered, "Reading is specific. Knowing requires only the outlines of our thoughts, the general things our minds breeze through everyday."

"And I'm supposed to know the general things your mind breezes through everyday? Do you know mine?"

His lips lifted higher. "Work, rest, archery, and - I'm venturing - your late family."

Failing to find a loophole since it was meant to be "general things", she gave a brief shake of her head and muttered, "I set the bar too low."

He chuckled, the deep rumble from his chest vibrating through her fingers, sending the electrifying charge into her own heart. "Your turn, Sush." What went through his mind everyday? "Take a guess," he purred.

"Your sweetheart."

"Mm."

"The mavericks."

"Right."

"Anything to do with work."

"That's a given."

"Ways to kill Valor and Ferdinand, I hope?"

"Not at present, but if you like, I could—"

"Don't. It was a joke."

"Hm," he swayed them to a stop, hands still on her back, above her hips when he brought their faces closer and whispered, "You're forgetting someone very important."

"Another sweetheart?" she teased, yearning to know the answer her heart already knew yet still skittish about admitting it to herself.

His gaze dropped to her lips, and he swallowed, then meeting her eyes once more. "If that's what you'd like to call yourself, I'm more than happy to oblige."

Their noses touched in an affectionate tap, their eyelids fell to make way for a moment that should be felt than seen, the surface of their lips met in a featherlight touch. Breaths mingled, Greg's lips were closing in before Sush pulled away, hesitance dawning on her, needing him to know something before they took things further.

"Sush?" his hands clasped both sides of her face, concern laced in his voice and etched on his arched brows.

She didn't know how to start, where to start. And this room, with so many people, with many pretending not to look but were - in fact - looking, doesn't make this an ideal place to talk.

"Sush, are you alright? Do you need something to eat?"

Just then, a cheery voice chimed from their side that echoed, "Aww, look at you two."

## Chapter 61

"My queen. Cousin." Greg acknowledged, bringing himself next to Sush, facing the royal couple.

"Your Majesties," Sush greeted with a bow and curtsy.

Lucy's brow lifted at the title and the formalities, which she and Xandar returned before the queen said, "Honestly, Sush. You've been calling me Paw for years. This isn't an email. It's either Paw or Lucy, especially now that we're technically closer through a..." she glimpsed at the duke and said, "...family member. Actually, I'd prefer Lucy."

The hint wasn't even subtle.

That was when Greg had an epiphany - the queen never even allowed Izabella to address her like a friend. The one time Izabella tried, using her shortened name, the queen diplomatically put it to a stop by saying she was more comfortable with the title for the time being. It was an awkward exchange considering the queen had always been more comfortable with anything but titles, Xandar having to fill the sudden silence by saying that they should get to the food before things got cold when everything had just been served. The last server hadn't even left the room yet.

Izabella bounced back, didn't make a fuss. And Greg assumed the queen simply warmed up to her position - and maybe she had - never thinking her name-over-title preference hadn't changed.

He himself was given the permission to address her by name - several times. Tried it on his tongue once and never went back, finding it inappropriate and disrespectful. Lucy went so far as to say he was like Blackfur in that sense - a psychological maneuver to get one of the dukes to drop her title since they repelled sharing any similarity with one another. But because Greg knew the game she was playing, evident from the glint in her eye in those times, he simply said the heed to title



was something the majority of the kingdom shared, not just him and the other duke, then tried not to look too amused at her frustration that his cousin eventually had to cool off.

His gaze now fell on Sush, her silence pulling him back to the present.

Although Xandar and Lucy expected Sush to laugh a little, or at least smile, groped for words for a moment, accept or politely decline calling the queen so casually, or - better yet - be her complete self and say something audacious, the Chief Octopus was - to everyone's concern - lost for words.

"Sush, are you alright? Is he treating you well?" Lucy didn't wait for her response before turning to Greg and questioned more defensively, "Are you treating her well?"

Greg's mouth opened when Sush finally spoke, "It's not him. Really. I'm just... shocked. And my brain hasn't been at its most optimum these past few days, given the circumstances. I think I'll stick to Paw for now..." Since she wasn't sure where this thing with the duke was going yet. "...and maybe transition into your first name if and when the time comes."

"Of course," Lucy muttered, perplexed by Sush's demeanor.

The queen read their body language from a distance, and now again up close. There was undeniable attraction yet hesitant reciprocation at Sush's end. Lucy and Xandar had been discussing the possible reasons behind Greg still not feeling a mate bond despite having moved on from Izabella, despite already being attracted to Sush when they cliqued in so many ways, and now, looking at them together, she had her answer.

Turning to her husband, she mused, "The Ydaer effect might cover hunters, too. Who knew? I always thought it only applied to our species."

"First time for everything, my little freesia," Xandar responded with a similar intrigue behind his eyes, along with a soft smile - one reserved only for her and their pups.

Sush blinked, coming back to herself when she turned to Greg and asked, "The what effect?"

Seeing that she'd successfully planted another seed into Greg's mind, Lucy offered a smile and said, "Do let us know if you need anything else, Sush."

The queen excused herself, letting her king lead her to the drinks and food.

Greg fell into deep thought. Sush extracted her phone and googled "Edear effect" as Greg closed in on her ear and muttered, "Y-d-a-e-r."

"What type of word is that?" Sush complained in a whisper as she typed it out, skimming through a few summarized definitions before making sense of the queen's words from earlier. That bloody fox was a fucking mind-reader.

"Is it true?" Greg asked when she'd stopped scrolling, drawing her eyes to his. "Is there something holding you back?"

Sush sighed, tossed the phone back into her purse as she murmured, "Sort of. And it's quite... layered."

"Indulge me." All this time, he assumed he'd been the one holding them back. But now that he thought about it, he recalled the times she pulled back - all the times that required words. Her body responded to his as his did to hers, but were their minds headed in the same direction? The fact that they weren't bonded crossed his mind before, but he didn't care. He didn't think the absence of the bond could be from the Ydaer effect. On her end.

Who had she not moved on from? Mr. Sophisticated? Another man from her past? Had Greg just been someone she clung onto while she hunted for the one she truly wanted? Or worse - a vessel to make a former lover jealous this whole time?

He'd given his heart and let his head take the backseat once and it ended worse than bad. He wasn't making the same mistake again.

When Sush said nothing for a few moments, gathering her thoughts, his

hand left her back as he created a distance - one they both dreaded as he said, "If you're not ready, or if this isn't what you want, tell me now. My days of fooling around are long behind me. I thought I was building something permanent with you. After my former mate, I thought I didn't want that anymore, until I met you." The warmth in her chest blossomed, but the warmth came as quickly as it went when he continued, "If you don't feel the same, we end things here. We move on. No hard feelings. But I need to know where you stand in this. It's only fair to us both."

"It's not about not feeling the same!" Sush spat without thought in an angered whisper like it should have been obvious.

Her haste reply shocked herself and softened Greg, who closed the space once more and asked, almost begging, "Then what is it?"

Her eyes darted around the room, taking note of the curious glances and quiet chatters. Facing Greg once more, she knew she'd hid the truth - the depth of who she was - for long enough. It was either telling him, taking a chance that he'd be okay with her plans and where she came from along with where she was going, or lose him entirely. "Can we go somewhere more... quiet?"

She felt sheltered and safer with him now, but there was still a risk of eavesdropping that she'd prefer to remove.

Sliding his hand into hers, Greg pulled her away from prying eyes as he uttered a deep but gentle, "Come."



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## Chapter 62

At the balcony that Greg emptied - he literally stepped into the space and said, "Out. All of you." - he guided Sush to the far end, away from the light and noise from the inside, glared at the slowpokes taking their time to disappear, linked two mavericks to stand by the balcony entrance to stop anyone else from entering, then gave his full attention to his octopus.

Sush had been mentally rehearsing her way to start when they were on their way here, but she knew the lengthy story she hoped he was prepared to hear would still come out unstructured. "Before we get into... the layers, I need to know two things: one, your stance on marriage; and two, whether kids is something you're looking for."

Unfazed, Greg replied, "I'll start with the first: I don't give a fuck about marriage, but I do want my mate and I to mark each other."

"So civil partnership isn't a problem with you?" Sush questioned, growing hopeful.

"Those are just labels to me," he said truthfully, never seeing the difference because - unlike in some parts of the human world - there really was no difference between the two in the kingdom. Both involved two people. Both involved signing a certificate. Both may or may not have a ceremony. Benefits and aid were provided to both with mirroring terms. Greg wasn't the only one who saw marriage and civil partnership as merely different labels. The law did, too.

Greg explained, "At the end of the day, it's whether my soul and hers are entwined in a bond that's meant to last for eternity."

"Okay," she nodded. "And... children?" She was much more pessimistic about this part. Given Greg's relationship with his niece, it was hard to see he didn't want pups of his own, so she was utterly surprised by the words that came next without hesitation.

"Offsprings had never been on my list. Being who I was, I never saw myself as a parent. I'd love to have them with my mate if she wants one...or a few, preferably not more than half a dozen. It'd be difficult to monitor their movements, but having them is not a must for me. Never has been. And frankly, I'm more than happy with Enora for that kind of company and happiness."

Wow. This was easier than Sush anticipated. Blinking in disbelief, she admitted, "Same here. I don't have an issue with kids but I never pictured myself as a mother, something that some people still find hard to understand." Taking a breath, she continued, "Okay. Since we're on the same page in those regards, I should tell you why I'm here with the hunters, and where I'm going. This is going to be... a very long story."

"Good thing we've got time." He came closer in a way that was telling her he wanted to know, even if they took all night, even if it took all week.

She nodded and began, "So... I wasn't born a huntress. I only got my mark when I was eighteen, after the last of my relatives died."

This was unusual. Late bloomers didn't exist amongst hunters. You were either one or you weren't. You couldn't just be one mid-way because marks didn't appear mid-way. It was the reason some hunter couples gave away their children at birth if the infant bore no mark. It was disgraceful for two hunters to birth a Liability. Marriages had broken down because of it - because suspicions and questions of adultery were brought into question. Even when paternity tests were done and the DNA confirmed, some children may still be given up for adoption and divorce was considered because of some superstitious belief that they couldn't produce a hunter due to the fact that they "weren't the best fit for one another".

Sush's case was different. She was born a Liability. A Liability was supposed to live and die as a Liability. No exceptions.

"How did you do it?" Greg asked, curiosity channeled through his voice.

"I don't know," she whispered, lost. But then she frantically retracted,

"Wait, that's not completely true. I mean..." she sighed, shutting her eyes against the cold night air, hating to sound scattered. The last time she was like this was when she lost her uncle, which felt like a lifetime ago.

Greg's thumb drew circles on the back of her hand as he said, "Take your time."

It didn't make her feel better. Sush felt that she'd already taken her time. She knew how she felt about him. She knew how she was when she was with him. She knew she wanted more with him, and had always ended up smiling to herself when she knew he wanted it too. But she also knew she was the one who'd held them back, because of a side of herself that she'd gotten used to hiding from everyone.

Letting his touch guide her back, she continued, "I don't have concrete facts or any... certainty of how the mark ended up on my nape, but I suspect it's from... trauma."

A pocket of silence followed before Greg's voice - careful and crestfallen - echoed, "I'm sorry."

Sush held up a hand. "No, you don't get it yet. It wasn't from the trauma of losing my family. That was... worse than horrible, but before they passed, my uncle decided that I was old enough to know... or that I should know my mother... didn't just die." Her eyes met his, and she disclosed, "She was murdered."

Greg's brows shot to his hair. His animal sat so still. And they both stopped breathing. When he finally blinked, he only uttered three words - low and homicidal, "Who did it?"

One of her shoulders lifted and fell back, head gave a slight shake and lips pulled into a grim line. "I wish I knew. I wish I had a name. A short answer. But I don't. When I was ten - the last time I saw my mother - I stayed the night at my aunt's place when my mother was supposed to meet him - my birth father. And she never came back. She told my aunt and uncle that she was going to tell my father of my existence, to insist that he start taking responsibilities for me."

His brows furrowed, recalling her personal details that were kept with Human Resources. "I thought your father died in an accident."

"The name on file was my stepfather. He came into the picture when I was four and died when I was seven. Abusive as hell in the years he was married to Mom. I was so glad the truck ran over him that I smiled in my sleep for a whole month after he died."


Explains her aversion to marriage, Greg thought.



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