

Chapter 80

"It must have taken a lot out of you," Sush taunted with a smirk when they were in the car after dropping off Enora at the royal residence, promising to pick her up for ice-cream and a trip to the park later.

"It did. I felt like I gave off an arm," Greg replied, recalling the way he had to lower himself to Little Blackfur's level, swallow a sigh, hold back his dislike for the pup, and ask whether he could have the photos he wanted. All without scaring the child. And all of this could have been prevented had Sush simply asked on his behalf, which she didn't.

What made it worse was when she said it was unlike him to hide from a challenge. His plan B was to wait for the photos to circulate within the family then get them from the queen, but after what Sush said, it would just seem like he was running away from someone whose height didn't even reach his thigh.

Scoffing in amusement, Sush replied, "I think you'll find the arm you lost was your pride. I wouldn't worry about it not growing back. Lycans possess superior healing abilities after all." Greg made a sound, eliciting her chuckles, before she reached over to his thigh, and said, "You did good. Lewis seemed to be okay with you."

Before her hand retracted, Greg's came and held it captive. His fingers laced between hers, grip tightened in a way that forbade her hand from leaving when he murmured, "You're going to pay for that."

As much as the thought excites her, she had the urge to point out, "I doubt asking you to give away your arm of pride changed anything we're going to do in the bedroom. Besides, Lewis is sweet. You know, I thought I understood the extent of your love for Enora at first, but I realized I didn't. It isn't just a bond. It's also... a promise... to celebrate

who she is, be there for the moments, protect her and decimate everything that could hurt her. I think I feel the same way with Lewis."

The last line made Greg choke on air and he had to pull over just to get his situation under control. Coughing profusely as a very frantic Sush unbuckled her seatbelt and leaned over, holding their joined hands to his chest as she angled him forward, letting him cough out the sensation while she waited in wide-eyed dismay, worry flitting across her face.

When the coughs finally stopped and he took in lungfuls of air, his forehead rested on the steering wheel, his eyes shut when he thought about what she said. After her interaction with the boy, it wasn't a surprise to hear that she liked the pup. But to hear that she developed something for Little Blackfur the way he had for Enora, his whole body went into shock.

Eyes still shut and breathing steadied, he murmured, "Can't you pick another pup? The other princess and prince are still available."

When she didn't answer, he looked to his side, just in time to see her irritation when she said, "Next time, I'll let you choke to death."

"You're actually picking Little Blackfur over me?"

Entertaining his petty argument, she responded, "Lewis is cute and sweet. And he doesn't ask me to pick someone else."

"Good looks and a lack of demands are hardly a foundation to a healthy, long-term relationship." He straightened and began to carefully put the car back into drive.

"And what, pray tell, is a foundation to a healthy, long-term relationship?"

"My moral compass is skewed to a certain extent, so don't take what I have as the rule - frank communication, conscious commitment and heated sex." The directness got her tongue-tied, and he used her

silence to add, "Little Blackfur doesn't even have ten thousand words in his vocabulary to communicate with you, let alone communicate frankly."

Despite his emphasis on the first thing on the listed criteria, Sush was mind-boggled with the last item, leading her to say, "You do know I was talking about platonic love, right?"

"Fine. Drop the sex. It's still not healthy. Communication and commitment - conscious commitment - are paramount."

"You're not being fair to him. How many words does Enora know?"

"By this evening, I'm going to make sure it's at least ten thousand and one. And let's not forget she's younger."

"Still, what does she know about conscious commitment?"

"That she chooses to look at me everytime her arrow hits the target board and not at any other uncle."

"That's subconscious."

"It was a conscious choice."

"Why are we fighting about this?"

"Of all the pups here and the children available in human territory, you had to bond with a Blackfur."

"What's wrong with them? They're good people. Annie is particularly sweet. I can see where Lewis gets his charm from."

Murmuring to himself, he said, "Goddess, this has been a trap by the divine all along. Making me fall for someone who got herself attached to a Blackfur."

"I know. What a nightmare," Sush said monotonously, taking out the vibrating phone from her pocket with an incoming call from Kenji.

"Yeah?" she began, placing him on speaker.

"Sush, we've got a weird lead on Monica Upshaw's location."

"Weird how?"

"It's a message passed on from one retired hunter to another until it eventually reached one of my eastern octopuses who is nearing retirement. And the message - if it has been passed on without mistakes - said that Monica has been in touch with you."

There was a pause, then her ears heated when she exclaimed, "I haven't seen that woman in months!" The audacity of that archer!

"Remember I said 'if it had been passed on without mistakes'," Kenji reminded. "I find it weird, too."

"Track down the line of messengers."

"I have. Having Pablo sending them over. You should receive it right about... now."

Sush felt her phone vibrate, noted the email that came in with a list of names, and she continued, "Thank you, Kenji. Does the first messenger know where she is?"

"No. The last contact with Upshaw was weeks ago, when the message was sent."

"Location?"

There were murmurs in the background after which Kenji uttered, "A night market five kilometers off our eastern headquarters." Only hunters who had to travel to work would stay within that radius, prompting Kenji to say, "I... don't recall seeing a western profile being sent over."

"I don't recall sending a western profile over."

"Ah. So we're both lost. Good to know. I should probably check with Asahi."

"Yes, please."

"I'll keep you posted."

"Thanks, Kenji."

A long pocket of silence followed. Sush's mind went to the various things that could have already happened while the message was being transmitted.

Greg's voice brought her back when he asked, "Do you think she's dead?"

Her head did a half nod then a half shake, undecided. "Yes... no. Maybe? I don't know. Catrine Carter's death went by ten hours before anyone found her. Monica Upshaw has been unreachable and untraceable for weeks."


There was something Kenji said that Sush just couldn't let go of: they'd been in touch? What did that even mean?



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