

Chapter 81 80-2 (Bonus Scene 2/2)

Days after Kenji's update, Sush was no closer to figuring out the last time she came in touch with Upshaw, and Asahi pointedly told the eastern leader that despite the eastern attacks - which he was still blaming Kenji and his octopuses for - he would never stoop below professionalism and hunter hierarchy. That assertion was entirely believable because Asahi has never broken a single rule in his career - be it something as serious as committing treachery or as trivial as abiding to lunch hour to the dot.

That brought them back to the lead itself: what did Upshaw mean? When did she and Sush last meet?

It was probably when Upshaw was still in the western headquarters, and the exchange was either in a queue during lunch at the cafeteria or that they brushed past each other on the archer's floor when their practice sessions coincided.

In both scenarios, they wouldn't have even spared each other a nod or greeting. Did that count as being in touch?

"What's on your mind?" Greg's drawl brushed against her skin in a sensual caress, tugging the contemplative haze away from her eyes. The soft dip in his voice echoed curiosity, patience, and concern, lilac eyes focused and waiting.

Sush heaved a steady exhale, unsure whether the sudden malfunctioning of her mental faculties was the result of the still-unsolvable Upshaw puzzle or the attentive gaze of the man before her. "Upshaw," she eventually uttered. "I can't even remember the last time I spoke to her... or seen her."

Now that she was plucked out from her restless pondering, Sush tried

to concentrate on her surroundings, which was what she was supposed to be doing in the first place. It was her patrol team's turn to stand guard in place of the fallen archers.

The presence of the lycan warriors lifted a huge burden off the hunters' shoulders but it didn't seem right to only have them patrolling the borders since it was technically not their problem, so the octopuses and chameleons took shifts on a rotation basis on top of their respective duties.

Greg didn't need to be there, but he'd rather not stay at headquarters and wonder whether his octopus was safe for each minute he couldn't see her but knew she was exposed to direct danger. He would say she could take care of herself, but when poison was in the picture, no one could take care of themselves, not even the lycans.

Nothing had been happening for the past three hours and forty-three minutes, so everything was pleasantly dull as fuck. He noticed Sush zoning out every few minutes, but her last space-out had been the longest - for a full five minutes. He ditched his post and approached her, and he was certain she didn't even sense him coming.

Upshaw.

That was a mystery worth losing focus over.

"You'll figure it out," he reassured with a level of certainty that she wasn't able to relate to at the moment. "I normally wouldn't tell you what to do, but if you could keep your head out of the clouds for another—" He checked his watch "--twelve minutes, I'll cover your archery range entrance fee for the next two months."

Her lips quirked into a smirk. "Bribing me so that I'll keep myself alive?"

"Yes."

"How does that make any sense?"

Despite their proximity, he stood closer. The tip of his shoes met hers, his presence engulfed her in a protective embrace. He didn't even have to touch her for her to feel touched. The way his gaze seared into her own put a stop to her breathing but ramped up her heart rate - a contradictory bodily response that only made sense when she was around him.

"It makes sense," he uttered "because I plan to keep you." His eyes steadily dropped to her shoulder, and the back of his forefinger trailed down the length of her arm when he continued in a seductive whisper, "For a very long time."

His touch left a pleasurable sensation - one that had her begging for more.

The corner of his lips lifted when he leaned in as his mouth hovered above her ear. "Your desire smells delightful, my octo—"

A snap of what sounded like a broken branch made heads whip at the innocuous-looking trees as everyone's attention snapped that way, weapons clicked and ready to fire, including Sush's.

Greg's claws extended on instinct, as did those of the other lycans.

But when they were greeted by nothing more than a gentle gust of wind and an eerie silence, Sush began taking steps forward, ready to investigate.

Greg retracted his claws and pulled her back by her elbow, holding her by her shoulders. She then found herself looking into a pair of onyx eyes as his growl came out in a low warning, "Don't. Even think about it."

Before she could argue, the next few snaps came in speedy successions but the sounds grew fainter, like whoever it was was making their escape.

Two of the three lycan warriors on guard charged into the forest with Greg as Sush and Manikam struggled to keep up. The two remaining hunters and a lycan warrior stayed behind.

Greg's superior speed enabled him to beat everyone and - with the respite that Sush was lagging with the other hunter, momentarily out of harm's way - he found himself tracking down a scent that smelled... human.

Did they unintentionally scare some random human exploring the forest?

It took Greg point two seconds to eliminate that thought. No random human would be exploring the borders of territories when there was nothing to explore in the first place. The trees here weren't rare, and there weren't any unique or exotic species living amongst the greenery either, so no curious minds would ever find themselves here.

If it's law enforcement from the neighboring species - the vampires, there wouldn't have been the need to run. The empire would have caught up by now that the kingdom and hunters were working together. The bloodsuckers weren't that ignorant or inefficient.

The scent trail was getting stronger and Greg's ears began picking up the sounds of panted breaths. He was close. And there was more than one of them.

When three men came into view, the lycans surrounded them, snarling in warning as Greg assessed them with more curiosity and disdain than defensiveness. The way the men were holding and aiming their guns showed that they were practiced shooters, and the way they were huddled - back to back - against each other while casting one another panicked, sideways glances show that - whatever plan they were executing - they did not take into account the presence of three lycans, or any lycans at all.

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Sure, this wasn't the most well-guarded part of the territory, but it wasn't unguarded. A minimum of two hunters and a maximum of three would always be on patrol.

As the thumping of Sush's and Manikam's footsteps drew nearer, one of the three intruders fired at Greg while his comrades discharge their weapons at the other two lycans, all three of whom dodged the bullets and - as soon as they regained their balance - charged forward with ferocious snarls.

What the lycans didn't expect was witnessing the intruders slit their own throats and collapse to the ground, gurgling their own blood. Their widened eyes of anguish gradually turned blank just as Sush and Manikam arrived.

Greg heaved a frustrated sigh. The shots fired at them were a distraction, not an attack.

"Search them," Sush ordered calmly as she knelt into the dirt and hands began rummaging through the corpse nearest to her with Manikam while the others did the same for the other two corpses.

In a zipped compartment within the dead men's pockets, they discovered vials of brownish-gray powder. Each intruder was carrying ten vials each. Manikam extracted the hunters drug-tester - a rectangular device with nothing more than a screen. Upon turning it on, he sprinkled some of the vial's contents onto the screen, which scanned the product from top to bottom.

After measuring the weight, it briefly loaded before displaying the name of the substance - maruntu.

"So that's why rehab facilities are still getting maruntu addicts," Manickam murmured to himself, moderately paralyzed at the results.

Maruntu was a drug that was banned over two decades ago. Even so, the number of addicts for this feel-good substance had been increasing

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bit by bit over the years. Traffickers were hard to find and even harder to convict, and the source was never near being found.

Was this the source? If it was, which patrol team had ever let the traffickers through? Hunters were rotated every three weeks until the western massacre turned everyone's schedule upside down.

Every three weeks... Sush sighed to herself. The fixed schedule was too routined - too predictable. The traffickers may have tracked the archers' rotations and knew which ones would let them pass and which wouldn't. And someone must have forgotten to let these intruders know about the changed routine.

But that also meant Sush had a lead on possible moles amongst the hunters. She would know whose turn it was to patrol today had the massacre not happened as soon as she checked the archives, but the issue would be proving those hunters were moles, now that their evidence - the traffickers themselves - were dead and couldn't be brought in for interrogation. Without evidence, Valor wouldn't even consider suspending them, especially now that they were low on archers as it was.

"We'll have to submit a report to the ministry," Sush decided. "With any luck, these three may have been arrested for trafficking before, and the police themselves might have more information about who they are for us to know who they're linked to, and who we should be looking for next."

From her side, Greg uttered, "It probably isn't as tedious as it sounds, Sush. Look." He gestured at a body he turned over.

On the corpse's nape, there sat a mark of a chameleon.

They flipped over the other two, and they bore the chameleon marks as well. These were thugs. Which was odd. Neither Sush nor Manikam had seen these faces before, so they either left the hunters before Sush and

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Manikam joined; or they never joined the hunters in the first place.

Who were these chameleons? And who were they working with?

And that's a wrap of the bonus chapters. Thanks for reading, everyone!



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