

Chapter 83

Sush, Patterson, and Greg paced down the white-tiled floors and passed the sea of green patients dotted only by the white beds and doctors and nurses in white.

Valor received word from the hospital that Hazel was lucid for a good two hours a day since three days ago, and sent the two chiefs to ask about the events leading up to the incident the other day, about whether there was a system error and who she saw behind the computers. Several octopuses and chameleons had already interviewed the rest, but since this was Hazel - the Deputy Octopus - Valor insisted the chiefs went.

Hazel was in green like the others, back against the bed frame cushioned by a pillow. She looked pale and her eyes were dull, the usual jubilant shine was no longer in sight as she stared out the window. The moment she heard footsteps approaching, her head swung and her droopy eyes locked with her colleagues, lips tipped into a lazy smile. "Hey, guys."

"Hi, Hazel," Sush began, standing by her bed. "How do you feel?"

Hazel shrugged. "Lucky," she murmured, almost inaudibly, her smile already withering.

Patterson shifted uneasily and pushed a smile. "The doctors say you're recovering well."

Eyes flickering to him, she merely mused, "Yeah, I hear that everyday in the short time I'm able to stay awake." They weren't used to this version of her - this melancholic version. The vibrancy seemed to have been poisoned and died with the archers. "They said it was zahar?" she asked, more to make conversation than to know the answer.

"It was," Sush confirmed. Her deputy's demeanor - weak and depressed - made her wonder whether the things Greg found on Hazel were true, whether Hazel actually owned an encrypted phone and really did send those coded messages. Sush didn't doubt Greg or Jade, but what if someone planted the evidence on Hazel? Or what if Hazel stole the encrypted phone to conduct her own investigations on the matter? Looking at her now, it was difficult to see she initiated any of this. Hazel seemed as shaken as anyone would be.

Clearing her throat, Sush began, "Haze, I don't mean to be an ass, but we're here on Valor's instructions to ask about what you remember from that day."

Hazel's eyes trained on Sush, taking a moment to ponder, before her small smile came back in place. "Then Valor's the ass." The ladies chuckled briefly - treasuring the brief moment of familiarity and closeness they shared in the trenches for years. Hazel then looked at her fingers, counting that there were ten because she couldn't even count to four before dozing off on the first day she woke up.

When the deputy was ready, Sush hit the record button on her phone and Hazel began, "What I remember was... I went up for my weekly training. I was with Joshua. We were talking about how hot Baxter was." Sush's brows shot up at the candidness. Maybe the poison didn't wash a lot of Hazel away, and the chief had to will her brows back to their resting position as Hazel continued, "We were... waiting for our turn for the... simulator." She yawned. "Then, the uh... you know the generators make a sound?"

"Yeah?"

Hazel continued, "The buzzing stopped. The place went dark and I heard those sharp, sliding sounds, the emergency lights came on, so we could see, and we saw we were trapped. All the doors just... disappeared, and practically everything else was shut down. Then, I

heard something hit the floor... like a clang, and I think someone screamed, or it could be a few people, or it could've been me, I don't know. And then I woke up here. And that's it. That's all I remember."

When Hazel didn't say more in the next three seconds, Greg questioned, "Do you remember the color of the emergency lights, Deputy?"

"Uh... white, why?"

"How far would you say you were from the nearest metal wall?"

"Six feet, I guess?"

"And the clank, what did it sound like?"

Hazel blinked like she was fighting the fog. "Uh... like something being thrown on the floor."

"Take a guess of the material."

"Aluminum, I think? I'm not sure."

Greg continued, "After the clang, did you hear anything before the screams?"

Hazel thought hard, the veins on her temple getting more distinct. "I think I did... something whooshing out, like a gas leak."

Beneath his hand covering his mouth, Greg's lips tipped just the slightest. Hazel, having to use her full mental faculties on the questions that were being posed, hadn't noticed the way Sush blinked before her eyes shifted and she began staring into space at her final answer.

Patterson said nothing, fearing a wrong move or word would demolish the duke's momentum and the Chief Octopus's train of thought. They bid Hazel goodbye and Sush channeled every bit of hypocrisy she had within her being - which was not a lot but hopefully enough - when she offered Hazel a hug and asked her to rest well.

Trotting out of the hospital and to the parking lot, Patterson decided

he'd had enough of the silence. "Sush, I hope you know by now that in any normal circumstance, I wouldn't give a damn about what you discovered in a room, but the fact that my chameleons were involved makes this my business, not just yours. What happened there?"

Sush turned to him - judgment written all over her face - when she questioned, "The can was thrown at the innermost corner. The mavericks monitoring Hazel after she fainted and carried her out said she was near the entrance. How would she have heard the gas coming out of the can from the other side of the archer's floor?"

Greg's hand slid to her lower back when he added, "Not even every one of my mavericks heard the gas, even with their animal senses. Out of the four near the deputy, only one thought he heard it. The others didn't."

"She was lying," Patterson murmured to himself, then locked gaze with Sush again. "I'm not defending her but... what is she getting out of this? The poison has clearly affected her. She could have died. If she's part of this new..." He couldn't believe he was saying it. It hadn't even been a year since the last one occurred. "...conspiracy, how is she alright with putting her life on the line for it?"

Unbeknownst to them, at a small window high up in the hospital floors, Hazel, who stood on the toilet tank in the empty patient restroom was watching their little meeting, and although she couldn't see their facial expressions from afar, the way Patterson's arms went across his chest was a dead giveaway that the talk was serious business. That, along with the fact that her chief didn't crack a lame joke or drop some kind of sardonic remark before leaving, told Hazel that she was short on time. Her fingers moved to feel the flat-shaped device tucked in the raised edge of the right side of her bra, confirming it's still there since her mother's visit a few days ago, and she knew it was time to use it.