

## Chapter 87

Monica Upshaw was dead.

Her body was found by two lycans patrolling from a distance, who detected her scent but didn't think much about it at first before realizing - after hours - that the scent had neither faded nor strengthened, and carried the familiar smell of blood. As they followed the trail, they discovered the huntress, hair sprawled on the ground, eyes wide but empty and had a number of slashes at her neck.

Word arrived at hunters' headquarters from the defense ministry and Valor demanded Sush, Patterson, Kenji, and the newly-appointed Chief Archer, Millicent, be at his office two hours before their usual 9:00 a.m.

Greg did not appreciate having to skip a love-making session because of the defense ministry's recklessness in losing yet another huntress. And he much less appreciated that Sush had to start off her morning being upset upon receiving the news, as much as she tried to hide it. Honestly, could those idiots do anything?

In Valor's office, Greg made himself comfortable on the couch, one leg folded with the ankle resting on the opposite knee. But his collected posture was not shared by the hunters in the room: Kenji had a few strands of hair that went out of place, Patterson looked deep in thought, Valor looked like he was about to deliver news on yet another death, and Sush looked a few years older within hours.

Heaving a frustrated sigh, the duke questioned, "Are the defense ministers invisible?"

Valor harrumphed, noting the sarcasm on the defense ministry's absence. "They have given their orders, Your Grace, and since the Upshaw death has attracted the media, the ministers are occupied with

having to put out the fire."

"How very sympathizing," Greg replied monotonously with onyx eyes and a scowl. "Though since they possess no skills in ensuring something as basic as safety, I doubt they're capable of smothering any kind of flames."

A hand reached for his, the touch delivering a charge through him, drawing back his rage, and he held back the next words.

Sush turned to Valor and began, "This is on them, Valor. I've done everything I could to ensure Upshaw's safety. The ministry screwed up. Don't expect me to handle the media."

"You're not," Valor began.

Kenji's and Patterson's heads bobbed up. If Sush wasn't helping to control the issue, who was? They begged the gods of heaven and hell that it wouldn't be them.

The commander cleared his throat, glanced uneasily at Greg, and announced in a somber murmur, "The ministry has decided that - until investigations are complete - your involvement pertaining to any issue concerning the hunters shall cease, Alagumalai."

"WHAT?" Kenji and Patterson barked as Millicent exclaimed, "NO!"

Greg growled and was about to pounce from his seat had Sush not held him back by his arm.

Eyes trained on Valor, Sush questioned as calmly as she could, despite the fire in her eyes, "And the reason for my suspension?"

"They suspect you were involved," Valor admitted, resigned.

Kenji hissed, "That's ridiculous! There's a higher probability of Ferdinand executing such a thing than any of us in this room!"

Valor's gaze flitted to him, still looking at the eastern leader in disdain.

"I'd be careful of what I'd say if I w—"

"What's the point?" Patterson exclaimed, shocking the room. "What's the point of us being careful when the ministry has recklessly sent two of our own, given us no access, no information, then later, news reaches us when they're found dead! This isn't the hunters' fault, Valor. And accountability should be taken by the ministry, not us, especially not the Chief Octopus."

Kenji added, "How was her suspension even a solution? Who the hell do you expect to fill her shoes pending the investigation?"

"The deputy has been certified to be fit enough fo—"

Greg snapped, "The Traffic Cone? She can't stay awake for more than five hours a day and you expect her to run the system? Have y—"

"Six hours, Your Grace, as of this morning," Valor corrected.

"Hazel's not fit enough for this, Valor," Patterson argued. "It'll do more harm than good. Why do they even suspect Sush is involved in anything?"

Valor shifted in his seat, hand ran over his head, cleared his throat twice before he shared, "Upshaw's last known location is Itam, and her last form of communication had been made through a message sent to the ministry three days ago, begging the ministry to get Alagumalai to 'stop it'. Only no one knows what the 'it' is."

"I..." Sush began, taking heavy breaths, the fuel in every part of her had been set on fire with those words, and her entire being was preparing to explode. Her voice came out in a hauntingly low whisper, "...have not even been able to contact her in weeks. Every single fucking attempt was blocked. By the ministry. By Ferdinand. And by YOU."

Kenji questioned like he was interrogating, "What were the other messages?"

"We are not privy to that."

Greg berated, "So you're suspending the hunters' greatest asset, opening yourselves to vulnerability based on a message completely taken out of context?"

Being more cautious with his words with the duke, Valor uttered, "Things may work differently in the kingdom, Your Grace. But over here, we are bound to the commands of the defense ministry. I have tried to argue for Alagumalai to be retained, but the message, on top of the fact that she survived the supposed elevator crash the day we lost our archers, has not put her in a good light."

"Spare us the bull, Valor," Greg leaned in. "It has not put you in a good light, and it's definitely raining shit on the ministry now, nothing less than what you all deserve. And you and your superiors must have a penchant for disaster because if things are on fire now, it's only going to get worse without her here."

"Greg, it's fine. That'll do," Sush uttered.

Head swinging to her, he argued, with controlled anger, "It is definitely not fine. And this - you not being here - it won't do. Carter's and Upshaw's deaths happened when you had no access to them. Imagine what would happen to the rest of them once you relinquish access entirely."

From his peripheral vision, he sighted Sophisticated staring into space, murmuring to himself like he was delivering a prophecy, "We're all going to die. If the mystery killer doesn't finish us off, the lycans and wolves would. If not them, then maybe the vampires. We're going to die."

Holding Greg's gaze, Sush insisted, "It's not a dismissal. It's a suspension. We'll wait it out."

Greg's adamance and momentary disbelief urged him to fight her, but that was when he caught something in her eye - a glint, a signal. She

could still find the culprit without being chief. All she needed was an encrypted laptop. Greg himself still had access to files and everything else pertaining to the hunters. She would still have access - through him.


"There's one more thing I should mention," Valor declared, pulling the attention of the room back to himself.



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