

Chapter 88

Valor braced himself for the most explosive outburst yet. "In light of recent... developments in Alagumalai's... relationship with His Grace, the kingdom's access to anything pertaining to the hunters sh—"

"Finish that sentence and you'll die," Greg snarled. "The treaty clearly states the kingdom would be given at least seven days in notice before my involvement can cease."

"I was getting there, Your Grace," Valor hummed. "The kingdom is being notified as we speak."

"By whom? Ferdinand's secretary?"

"By the deputy defense minister. We expect an immediate demand for a meeting to renegotiate the terms from your rulers, because some in the ministry suspect that the lycans who found Upshaw were the ones wh —"

"I dare you to finish that sentence," Greg growled, rage rolling off his being like a heatwave even though the lycan warriors weren't his people. "And I dare you to say that to the queen."

Valor shifted again, sweat beading on his forehead, before proceeding to get the last of the message out, "Until the meeting with the defense ministry concludes with the lycan rulers, your access would be confined to information pertaining only to the hunters, meaning should something on file link to the defense ministry, even something as vague as a footnote, you and the mavericks are barred from looking through it for now."

Kenji's eyes bulged. "Commander, this is the time to share more information, not withhold it. Our numbers have dwindled and the

ministry is demanding we further dwindle it by kicking out the lycans? How is it that you weren't able to argue in our favor?"

"We are dependent on the ministry for all our resources, Suzuki. I can and have argued, but if they insist on us pulling the plug on anything, we are obliged to pull it."

Patterson was beginning to get a migraine. "Valor, let me get this straight: the defense ministry suspends the main brain of the hunters, cuts off the mavericks who have been the reason some archers, chameleons and octopuses are still alive after the zahar massacre, and the ministry's strategy now is to continue keeping us in the dark while someone who can't stay conscious for more than six hours take the reins of all systems, which essentially includes our lives?"

Valor sighed, resigned. "It's a matter of perspective, Patterson."

"But that's essentially the plan?"

"Afraid so."

"Then it's settled," Patterson declared, rising to his feet. "I'm handing in my resignation."

"As am I," Kenji said.

Millicent uttered, "I suddenly don't feel fit to lead the archers anymore."

"No," Sush commanded. "You three are staying."

"What?" Patterson hissed, face morphed into disgust.

"Why?" Kenji whined.

Patterson continued, "There are other ways to kill us, Sush. I don't want to die this way."

"You're not going to die," Sush noted pointedly, eyes narrowed.

Her curt dismissal of his concern sent him further to the edge of a temper he didn't even know he had. "You won't be here. You have no

way of knowing that!"

Millicent interjected, "Yeah, Sush, not that I don't trust you more, but in this case," she thumb-pointed at Patterson. "I'm taking his side."

With a stern gaze, Sush insisted, "Running away is not going to keep anyone alive."

Kenji was the first to throw that under the bus. "That makes no sense. Once we resign, many others will follow suit. We'd all be alive."

Sush argued, "Whoever the killer is, he or she wants our defenses compromised - targeting the archers, now having the lycans dismissed. It's not a coincidence. Each of us in this room knows more than the rest of the hunters." She glances at Patterson, who sank back into his seat, as Sush continued, "If they suspect we know something that they'd prefer to never surface, they will come after us. Every one of us, meaning we need to get to them first." Turning to Valor, she asked, "Did the ministry say whether the lycans were able to sniff out Upshaw's trail from where her body was found?"

"I'm not allowed to further discuss anything with you, Alagumalai. But... even if I am, I'll tell you that particular information is being marked as confidential."

"Fan-fucking-tastic," Patterson cursed in a murmur, staring out of the window.

In a low, apologetic tone, Valor turned to Sush, and said, "You may collect your personal items within the next hour. After that, you cannot step foot in these premises until you've been cleared in black and white. I'm sorry, Alagumalai."

"Sorry our ass," Greg shot back. As his nostrils flared and Valor began turning white under his onyx glare, Greg's claws swiftly extended and dug into the armrest while the only thing holding him from going old school on the commander was Sush frantically muttering for him to

calm down and telling him that killing Valor was going to do more harm than good, which Greg wasn't sure he quite agree with.

Despite that, his claws reluctantly retracted as the seconds passed, and he took a deep inhale as commanded by the siren he had for a lover. Eyes still glued to the commander, Greg's mouth opened - ready to deliver the most destructive retort to make the noble leader squirm when Lucy's link came in. 'Greg.'

Greg's mouth closed - the link taking priority. 'My queen.'

'How is she?'

'Less enraged than I am.'

'Mm. We've just got on the jet and are on our way. Xandar is getting our pilot to delay the journey by an hour. At the ministry, we'll be able to hold them for another hour. Two, tops. Take everything you need until then.'

'They've already blocked us from government-related files, my queen. We can still hack into many things, bu—'

'Xandar and I have just removed that hurdle. Took us all morning. There's no evidence linking our warriors to the killing. Agu cracked and mentioned there were two soldiers nearer to Upshaw than our warriors were at her time of death, so if our people are suspects, so are theirs. They couldn't insist on keeping lycans as suspects because it rings diplomacy alarm bells. The media would have a field day and the government would have an even bigger mess to clean up. Now that their national security excuse is demolished, the treaty remains valid and enforceable. Your access to everything persists until the end of our meeting with the ministry, which would most likely end with a momentary suspension of our demands. Hack and break into everything until then.'

'As you wish, my queen... and thank you.'

'Take care of each other. I'll link you again later.'

When his eyes cleared, he simply informed Valor, "There has been a recent development with regards to my accessibility. Give your superiors a call."

Without waiting for a response, he rose from his seat, offering Sush his hand out of instinct, which she accepted without thought. They left Valor's office, but not before Sush and Kenji exchanged a look, one that they shared many years ago, one that conveyed they had each other's back.

As the two strode down the corridor, Greg linked his mavericks. 'We're being kicked out and we're short on time. Take every single thing that'll be inaccessible once we leave. We have less than three hours. Step on things.'

'Yes, Your Grace.'

By the time his eyes cleared, they were on the ground floor walking through the reception area, the sound of heels clicking against the floor.

"The first link - was it the fox?" Sush asked.

Greg nodded. "She's concerned about you."

"I'm alright," she said, voice already seemed weakened when it wasn't even 9:00 a.m. yet.

Sush had no personal items to collect. Everything she did here, everything she deemed personal, couldn't be taken with her: her plans, her inventions, her sketches. These were things that belonged to the headquarters.

When they were several steps away from the glass-door entrance, something glaring came through the entrance. And it wasn't the sun.