

## Chapter 98

The wooden cottage seemed normal enough from afar with its moldy brick walls, thatched roof, and casement windows. Narrow trees, bushes, and shrubs grew all around. Luscious grass covered the land, save for a stone path from the entrance door to the wooden gate.

The lights went off about thirty minutes before Greg, Sush, and the others arrived. The watchers reported that no one came out. And everyone had been smart enough not to suggest that the Robinsons may be taking a nap since it had hardly been four hours since they were up. But the stillness was unsettling.

Greg grew impatient when nothing happened for the next thirty minutes, and ordered Baxter to send in a drone - one in the shape of a firefly that flew to the window, where its cameras caught nothing, then glided to the front door, sneaking in through the gap.

Despite the gloomy weather outside, it was still bright enough for the drone to spy without needing to turn on its torch. On every maverick's phone, they watched the footage live while the hunters who weren't keeping their eyes on their surroundings crowded around the mavericks.

The interior carried earthy tones - brown furniture, wool carpet, a stone fireplace with actual firewood, and pendant lights hung from the ceiling. A daffodil-yellow shawl was thrown over the edge of the couch littered with throw pillows of bright marigold. The coffee table had a tray of two teacups - one emptied and one half filled - and a white porcelain pot with printed pink peonies.

The drone flew closer to the ceiling, getting a bird's eye view. Rows of framed photos sat on any flat surface that could hold one - the top of the fireplace, drawers, low cabinets. Zoning in on the most cluttered

surface - the chest of drawers - the drone landed and paused as the mavericks and hunters studied the photos. To everyone's surprise and bewilderment, none of the pictures were of the Robinsons. In fact, the people in the photos looked nothing like a Robinson.

There wasn't a common thread between them either. There were men and women of all colors, shapes, sizes and attire. When a picture of a man in a turban came into view, Sush instantly said, "Stop."

Baxter halted the drone.

"Do you know him?" Greg asked, hand on her shoulder.

Sush's brows furrowed deep, thinking hard. She knew him. She just didn't know where she knew him from. After a moment of silence, a bolt of recognition entered her eyes as she whispered like it was a secret, "He looks like one of those deported after the hunters took over investigating my mother's case. In fact, he looks like the one who led the investigation before he was dismissed."

"Is he the only familiar face so far?"

She mm-ed.

Greg nodded at Baxter to keep it going, and when there wasn't anyone else of interest, the drone flew over to the fireplace and continued its spying there, and the first photo had been strong enough to make many breaths hitch.

It was a face that had Baxter and the others whirling their heads toward Sush - a photo of a smiling woman who looked eerily similar to the Chief Octopus. The dirty gold frame held a thin layer of dust, a sign that it was cleaned often though not often enough. On the lower right corner of the frame, there was a handwritten date in black, and Sush instantly recognized it as the date she and her relatives last saw her mother.

As the drone moved on to the next pictures, everyone tore their sights

off Sush and reluctantly turned back to the screens. Only those who'd been privy to the eastern files recognized Porsha Delaware, Regina and Austin Chen, Shahrul Ibrahim, and Sakura Kondo. But gasps and murmurs soon spread amongst the hunters when the photos of the last three came into view - Catrine Carter, Monica Upshaw, and Sush herself. And while every frame had a date written at the right corner, the one with Sush's picture remained clear.

While Sush's mind ventured down the possible reasons the Robinsons wanted her dead - whether because she was getting close in discovering their crimes or simply because she was the daughter of one of their victims and was technically a living loose end, or something less aggressive like she was appointed chief over their daughter who'd been deputy for years, Greg's darkened eyes and raging breaths radiated an anger that no one could match.

He instructed Baxter to scan the property for inhabitants, poisons and explosives, finding nothing. The drone could detect that the air was clear from poisonous substances and that none of the cabinets and shelves held them, but that didn't mean there wouldn't be anything since the drone couldn't break through floorboards and feel through cushions for hidden poisons.

As the drone was being brought out, Greg uttered, "There must be a hidden room leading to an underground passageway. We should go in and have a look."

He meant the mavericks and lycan warriors, so when Sush rose from her squatting position, he held her by her waist with an unyielding grip that was more resolute than affectionate. "Where do you think you're going, my octopus?"

Her brows arched. "You said we're going in to have a look."

"I said we..." his hand gestured to himself and his fellow lycans. "...are

going in to have a look. You're not part of this club. Yet. I apologize for having to disappoint you, Sush, but you're staying until we've made sure that place is really poison-free."

"And what if it isn't?" Sush challenged, fixing him an unwavering stare. "What if it isn't poison-free? What if there's oleander?" Despite her sharp tone, anyone could hear the worry in her voice even if they couldn't see it from her eyes.

Dodging her point on purpose, the duke simply replied, "Precisely. Which is why you and the other hunters should stay here for now." Leaving a quick kiss on her cheek, he attempted to wrap up the issue. "I'll update you once we've--"

Eyes trained on him, she tapped on the communication device hooked at her ear, instructing the hunters, "Teams B and C, stay where you are. Don't engage until instructed. Team A, we're going in with the duke."

The leaders of each team responded, "Copy that, Chief."

As the mavericks tried not to smile or scoff at how little power their boss had over the chief, who was now smirking at him, Greg's brows furrowed just the slightest when his baritone came in a dismayed whisper, "Why do you do this?"

"Do what? Not do as I'm told?"

"That's not what I meant and you know it."

"Just like you knew what my concern was when I brought up oleander."

"None of their victims had been lycans, so I doubt they have oleander stored."

Jabbing his stone-hard chest with her finger, she refuted, "You have no way of knowing that, especially not when lycans have been curbing the last two attacks by getting the hunters out on time. Your species may have already created a big enough hurdle for them to take notice and put

contingency plans in place.”

In the pocket of silence that followed, with Greg scrambling his mind for a counter-argument, the firefly drone buzzed across the tense atmosphere and landed neatly back into Baxter’s storage can.

Sush’s firm voice permeated through the silence, “I’ve already given orders. We can either waste more time here or we can check out the abode together.”


At that line, Kenji rose and took the first step out, effectively signaling the rest of team A to follow suit.

Greg heaved a frustrated exhale, fingers sliding into Sush’s as they barged toward the property together.

The hunters and lycans circled the cottage, leaving no window or door unguarded. Right before Greg touched the door handle, the wooden structure swung open from the inside and they locked eyes with a sly smirking Traffic Cone, who chimed cheerily, “What took you guys so long? Had trouble finding the place?”

Chapter Comments



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## Chapter 99

Shocked. Spooked. Dubious.

Kenji was sure he was seeing a ghost. Jade wondered if their drones had been hacked. Baxter was recalling the last time he sent the drone for maintenance. How did it miss a human?

Patterson, Sush, and Greg knew the game was on.

Leaning against the doorframe, one hand holding her phone - screen facing Sush and the others that showed a big, bright, blinking orange button right in the middle that could activate Goddess knew what - Hazel began with the Chief Chameleon. "I always knew you had a thing for older women."

"Cut the crap, Hazel," he spat, not at all surprised by her knowledge.

"Who is that, my little hyena?" An unfamiliar feminine voice carrying a taunting ring came from inside.

Hazel kept her eyes on her colleagues, her smirk tilting higher when a flash of realization entered Sush's and Greg's eyes. She pulled the door back further to reveal her mother with lemon hair and marigold highlights, glasses that had medallion yellow frames in the shape of a five-petal flower. She was knitting leisurely on the couch, the daffodil shawl sprawled on the pillows before now around her neck.

Her father with short, combed back caramel brown hair that didn't look natural even from afar beamed from behind the newspaper that was held upside down - most likely on purpose, looking more harmless than his wife.

At the door, their daughter chirped, "These are friends. You both remember, Sush, right?"

The couple's eyes hadn't left the suspended octopus since the door opened. Hazel's mother adjusted her lensless frames with a small smile that Sush once saw many, many years ago when she was invited to sit with them on a parent-trainee visit. "Ah, the Rat. You've grown! And looking more like your mother." She chuckled. "Good that you've been making better decisions than her, though. I've always thought apples never fall far from the tree."

Although Greg and several others emitted a warning growl, it took everything in Sush not to bark out questions when she had a strong feeling she wasn't going to like the answers.

The old man uttered to his wife, "One who doesn't take after her mother could always take after her father, dear. This one may be leaning closer to the paternal tree."

"Oh, that's not fair, darling," she reprimanded, pausing the knitting like they were just spending a casual afternoon together. "They may have both found their ways to the defense sector but Ferdinand never had the brains to cover his own arse with all those mistresses, let alone covering the arse of the country. God knows how many children he fathered but this girl might be his most successful yet."

Deciding that she heard enough, Sush suppressed the raging typhoon of resentment, unwantedness and shame, and - through gritted teeth - warned, "You're surrounded and outnumbered. Surrender and we won't have to kill you."

The old couple burst into laughter like they'd just heard a joke. Mrs. Robinson even leaned forward to pour some tea. It was then most of them saw a gun leaning against a throw pillow. Even with a gun, they were outnumbered, yet they seemed so calm about it.

Greg's restraint was hanging by a fine thread. The only thing stopping him was the damn button that matched Traffic Cone's hair. Despite not

knowing what it did, Greg and his animal knew it was wiser to refrain from lunging until Hazel was fully distracted, which wasn't now.

Even if they got to the remote, there was no telling whether her parents had another one hidden somewhere that she'd be able to activate from a distance. He only hoped his people surrounding the property were already planting diminutive explosives to tear down the walls. The only problem with these mini versions they created was that it took time to set up. Its impact was limited to demolishing the building without affecting those outside, so the mavericks had to make sure the explosives were properly buried within the crevices of the walls.

Sush's voice, cold and calculated, rang through the air, "We've seen enough to know you and your family have something to do with the attacks, Hazel."

Hazel's head cocked when she said, "Well, that's offensive." There was a glint in her eye, the kind that admitted to a crime but was challenging her opponent, one that asked how far her interrogator would go to make her talk. The corner of her lips tilted higher. "It's offensive that you think we had something to do with the not-so-accidental accidents when we have everything to do with it."

Though unintended, several hunters amongst them took a step back.

"That's an admission," Kenji muttered to himself.

"No shit, genius," Hazel replied flatly, predatorial eyes never leaving her family's latest target whose photo had a frame that remained dateless. "But I do admit I'm impressed with your speed this time, Chief. I was touched, though a little underwhelmed, when you never even suspected I was involved in the conspiracy with Izabella and the others. I mean, every other chief and deputy chief were involved... Well, except for Abbott. We had to leave him out. Too straight an arrow. But the rest of us? We were a great team. Did you really think I was unqualified to play



the game?" She chuckled. "And to top it off, you even threw my name in the hat when it came to appointing the next chief. Appealed when you'd been appointed instead." She shook her head, drawing immense satisfaction of how naive her leader had been. "And because of that, I thought it'd take you at least another week before you find your way to one of the Robinsons'... humble abode. Since I've had to rush back, there hasn't been a lot of time to clean up the place. I hope the dust wasn't too obstructive for the little bug you guys sent in."

"How did you even know we were coming?" Patterson questioned, brows furrowed, tone defensive.

Hazel tsked. "Millicent really should have taken a few lessons on encrypting her devices, you know?"

Sush took over, "Since you're big on sharing and being honest today, let me ask you this: why kill the people you killed?"

"Oh," Hazel's brows rose, like she was reminded about something. "How rude of me not to explain. Your mother... It wasn't personal. It was a job. Valor got a call from Larissa Ferdinand, Valor called Mom and Dad here since they were the only octopuses with access to the type of... equipment requested, and boom! It happened."

Chapter Comments >



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## Chapter 100

Sush was about to lunge at Hazel at the unnecessary sound effect, but Greg held her back when Hazel's thumb got dangerously close to the button and the old woman's hand went around the grip of the gun, smile faltering just the slightest.

"As for the others," Hazel continued, "They were too snoopy. Delaware, the Chens, Ibrahim. All of them. They had one job - be a hunter and stay in their lane. But they just had to come across some shit on Ferdinand which - unfortunately - led the trace back to my parents, so Mom and Dad obviously had to get rid of them. And don't even get them started on Sakura Kondo." She shook her head then rolled her eyes like something was bogus. "The lengths that little woman went to crack us down was psychotic. Did you know Mom was pregnant with me at that time? I mean, Kondo herself was pregnant too but that's besides the point. The point is: plotting with Dad to get rid of that nuisance of a Japanese flower did not help with the stress. We're lucky I came out healthy and well."

"Definitely not how I'd put it," Greg spat.

Ignoring him, Hazel tapped her phone on her chin like she was thinking, thumb staying a few inches near the button. "You know, Sush, you really should have taken a hint when your car was hijacked. That was a warning. But you obviously didn't listen. If you did, we wouldn't have had to do that whole thing with the elevator and the archers. It was so much work." Hazel sighed like she was getting exhausted just talking about it. A glint entered her eyes like she had an epiphany. "Come to think of it, you're rivaling Sakura Kondo in being a thorn in our side. Maybe anything Japanese-related tends to be a nuisance, Sush. You're not of Japanese descent, obviously, but your name does resemble sushi. But

we only have you and Sakura so far, so we might need a larger sample before..."

Kenji stepped forward and snarled, "This. Ends. Here. Hazel. No more victims. You'd be lucky if you'd ever be allowed to see outside prison walls again."

"You sure about that?" Her thumb went that much closer to the button and she relished the fear entering Kenji's eyes for the brief moment when he wasn't conscious about it.

Something still didn't click for Patterson. "And what do the Robinsons get out of this?"

Hazel's gaze pivoted to him, turning away from Sush and Greg, her face morphing into disgust at his lack of imagination. "Money for holiday trips and power over the defense minister to do whatever. Duh."

"Ferdinand knows you've been behind the conspiracy with Delilah?" Kenji questioned, eyes fumed further.

"Why wouldn't he?" Hazel threw him another berating glare like he was too slow for her taste. "How do you think he's been maintaining his mistresses all these years? The black market pays a lot for access to human territories to sell and transport their products. And all Old Ferdy had to do was lower defenses. But his most daring venture had definitely gone sideways. Our family's mistake was to co-sign with him on a deal that he couldn't uphold, and we had to pay the thugs for the breach. Ferdy owes us a ton of money for that loss. We had to cut ties with him, obviously. The plan has been to take down his mistresses one by one every couple of weeks until he pays up. It really isn't that hard seeing that we've been the ones protecting them. Spoiler alert, we're getting him kicked out of office pretty soon. Gonna circulate about how incompetent Old Ferdy has become with so many recent attacks. And our new ally, Joyce Clearwater, has promised to be a more cooperative

new puppet. We'd still have to find a way to get what the thugs want to get back into their good books of course, so not all is resolved yet."

"What do the thugs want?" Sush questioned in a snarl.


Shrugging like it was obvious, Hazel said, "What else? Royal lycan blood."

A thunderous growl that shook the walls came as fast as Hazel was knocked down and the phone in her hand slipped before it was caught by Jade, who plugged in his gadget and shut the phone down entirely.

In Greg's defense, his animal made him pounce on the Traffic Cone before his human could rein in the beast.

Chapter Comments



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