

Chapter 47

Ella completed her task within thirty-six hours, reporting that Catrine Carter's bank statements and balances hadn't changed much pre- and post-Larson. Emails were clean. She didn't find anything interesting in the phone records either. But the thing that intrigued her was even though Carter's bank statements didn't change, her outward appearance did.

Ella showed Greg before and after pictures of Carter, and the difference in the chameleon's hair, make-up, clothes, bags and accessories was glaring. Greg checked the bank records again, at which time Ella promptly noted that Carter couldn't have afforded the change with a huntress's payroll.

"Have you traced her purchases?" Greg asked, fascinated and suspicious.

"That's where it gets weirder, Boss." Greg turned to her, and she explained, "Hair, I could find, because her name is in the salon's registry, registered post-Larson. But I couldn't find anything on the rest. I matched the timeline with the brands' purchase records and there was a vague pattern - an unknown customer paid large amounts in cash. And the amount matches the value of the bags Carter was carrying soon after."

Cash. "Looks like not all chameleons are foolish," Greg uttered, impressed by the precaution taken. "So she had someone. Any luck finding out who it was?"

"Not at the moment, Boss. But I'm currently looking through footage of the area she used to live in before she was assigned to that remote location."

Handing her back the pictures, he instructed, "Keep me posted on the updates. Good work, Tristan."

"I'll get to it." Ella nodded. Greg smelled frangipanis when Ella beamed and greeted, "Good morning, Chief."

"Hi, Ella." The voice, usually lively, stern, sure, sounded... different.

What happened? Greg wondered.

Ella excused herself.

Without looking at Sush, Greg scrolled through the maverick's report even though he'd already read through it the previous night, eyes staying on the tablet when he asked, "Everything alright?"

"You tell me." The tone willed Greg to look her in the eye, commanding him to. Wow, she was pissed. "Like you, I can't read minds. What the hell is wrong?"

Thinking of deflecting was a coward's way out but Greg couldn't think of anything else at the moment. "What makes you think something's wrong?"

Well, for one, he hadn't properly touched her or whispered inappropriate things to her in a day and a half. The infrequent contact his hand made with her back was fleeting and felt... obligatory, dead, devoid of the playful flirtation and heated tension. Even the beautiful, obnoxious smirk he carried held a sliver of wariness and uncertainty. The creatures around her may not have noticed a shift in the duke's comportment, but she did.

Sush heaved a long, exasperated sigh, seeing right through him. She could see he understood what she meant, yet was being wilfully ignorant. She'd ask why, but doubted he'd tell her if he didn't want to. He'd just deflect again, or worse - lie.

Curling her tongue in her mouth to roll away the words she wanted to

spit, reining everything in to avoid calling him out in the middle of the trenches with all the air she had in her lungs, her lips parted - a move that pulled Greg's sights to her mouth as his brows knitted in a way like he was looking at something that he couldn't have - and she uttered flatly, "If and when you decide to tell me, you know where I'll be... Your Grace."

The last two words hit him harder than the Izabella-revelation. The disappointment in Sush's eyes wrapped its fingers around his heart, demanding answers that he couldn't give. At least not yet. The click of her shoes when she left was draining his peace of mind and sapping his sanity.

Of course she didn't know it was killing him as much as it was killing her. The distance he put between them wasn't just getting suffocating, it was escalating his need for her. She used to be able to stay put somewhere in his mind, only coming forward when he wanted her to, which - admittedly - was already quite often. But since two days ago, it was as if she was done staying put, ransacking his head and plaguing his thoughts during the day and invading his dreams at night.

In a low, impatient, murmur, Greg linked Jade, 'What have you got on the deputy so far?'

Jade paused, which in itself wasn't a good sign. 'I'm questioning my hacking skills, Boss. I can't find shit for that timeframe.'

'Come again?' Greg pressed, voice raised.

'The deputy only got one text in the morning - from the chief, before the flight, putting her in-charge. Then nothing throughout the day when the chief was gone. Not even from Valor or anyone else. There is nothing after lunch. I asked Baxter three times whether he was sure the texting was after lunch. I think he's pissed at me now. Boss...' Jade sighed. 'I'm convinced I got the wrong device. But I can't find shit on her tablet

either. She doesn't use it to communicate.'

'What's on her activity log?'

'Socials. Haven't dug deep enough to know the details yet.'

'Step on it, Jade.'

'Doing my best, Boss. I'll update you asap.'

Sighing as his eyes cleared, he was about to breeze through the last inventory sheet when a distant stare made him look. His gaze locked with Sush for less than a second before she looked away, busying herself on her computer.

Once he was done with the last paragraph, he pushed himself off his seat, intending to pay the chameleons a surprise visit. He was already in a bad mood, might as well put the risk of his fury and sarcasm on the most manipulative type of hunters. Taking it out on the octopuses didn't seem right and the archers were growing on him, so that left the chameleons to absorb his wrath.

"Your Grace, you got a minute?" Traffic Cone, normally loud and lively, today soft and cautious.

Pushing his chair back, he said, "No, I'm not interested in coffee, lunch, or parties."

Hazel's brows crinkled. "This isn't about food or parties. It's just... is everything okay with you and the kingdom? Sush hasn't been herself these past couple of days. She hasn't said anything but does it have anything to do with you?"

Blinking at her direct and prying tone, he clicked his tongue and replied, "That's between us. Stay out of it."

Hazel's eyes fumed for the first time since they met when she snapped, "I would if it isn't affecting my friend's peace of mind!" The inventory folks paused all work and looked their way, swiftly turning away the

moment Greg and Hazel skimmed over them. Heaving a quick exhale to compose herself, Hazel threw out an angry whisper, "Whatever shit's going on with you, you shouldn't take it out on her. Man up and talk. Tell her. It's not that hard."

He only wished he could tell her. He only wished it wasn't that hard. "Thank you for your expert advice," Greg responded sardonically, walking around her. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm already late in disrupting the chameleons' peace of mind."

Hazel's mouth opened - ready to deliver another retort - when something vibrated in her pocket. Greg spotted the jutting corner of her phone when she slid the device out just slightly, leaving the rest of it in her pocket. And within a second, Hazel's rage evaporated. Letting it vibrate, she turned back to Greg and hissed, "You're lucky I have to get this right now."

"Finally. Something we can both agree on."

As she shot him a glare and trotted away, out of the trenches toward the direction of the emergency exit, Greg realized something and his pacing to the elevator came to an awkward pause as his eyes stayed on the door Hazel had just disappeared through.

'Jade.'

'Boss, come on. It hasn't even been an hour.'

Ignoring his protest, Greg asked, 'What color is the deputy's phone?'

'Yellow. With glitter. Is this a test of my observation skills?'

'Locate it. Where is the phone now?'

After a moment, Jade linked, 'At her desk. The impediment is a little thick so it could be in her purse at her desk. Or in the drawer. Why?'

Greg scoffed darkly. He knew she was a warning sign. 'She's answering another phone. Black. Just disappeared through the back corridor.'

Trace it and run through it.'



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