

Chapter 56

Sush was in an ash gray dress that hung from her shoulders by thin straps, the length of her skin stretching from her neck, down her arms and hands was on full display. Her hair was loose from her usual ponytail, the pink headband no longer in sight but her necklace still sat in its usual place.

She hadn't seen Greg yet but felt a buzz in her purse and her footsteps slowed as she dug through it. Her knitted brows eased into a soft line when she saw the caller ID, swiping to answer as her head swung around, looking for him, which was when their eyes locked and the corner of her lips lifted naturally.

The background blurred away as they took steps toward each other, closing their distance. When they were six feet apart, a figure appeared from Sush's right and a hand stopped her by her elbow. Sush's defenses took over and she yanked her arm away, eyes taking a defensive turn before realizing the figure was Kenji, who raised both hands with an amused smile and said, "Woah, woah. Sush, it's just me."

"Oh, hi." Sush blinked the murderous glint away and offered him a smile.

Greg appeared by her side, making a point to let the click of his shoes be heard in separate, distinct decibels.

Kenji didn't seem to get the go-away memo Greg was sending his way, which made the eastern octopus ask Sush, "How are you holding up?"

The duke didn't even bother acknowledging the eastern leader when he murmured under his breath, "How the fuck do you think she's holding up?"

As Kenji shot Greg a what-have-I-ever-done-to-you look, Sush's elbow delivered a soft nudge to Greg's side when she replied, "It's difficult. I'm sure you can relate."

Kenji's face morphed into embarrassed uneasiness when he admitted, "I'm not sure if I can, to be honest. I was a mess after losing six. The one on this side... it was ho—"

"She gets it, Sophisticated," Greg interjected when he noticed Sush subtly stiffened at the reminder.

Kenji blinked in obliviousness. That wasn't his name but it sounded like the duke was speaking to him. And judging by the tone, it wasn't a compliment. Before he could ask what it meant, not remembering his precise words during their first encounter, Sush spoke, "I appreciate the concern, Kenji. We'll just have to review the systems and rely on the lycans and wolves for now. Let's get everything fixed and scrutinized and pray..." her eyes darted to Valor and Ferdinand hanging around the other higher-ups. "...that certain people won't be screwing us up anymore."

Kenji and Greg followed her gaze as the latter scoffed.

Turning back to Sush, Kenji shook his head in disgust and disappointment when he whispered, "I hated that it happened. But I'm glad their attention is now diverted away from me and toward covering their own asses."

"Tell me about it," Sush murmured in agreement. "The only thing that would make this night better would be someone throwing shade at them without consequences."

Greg's lips stretched into a smile as his hand reached for her lower back. "Oh, someone already did. And it was very entertaining."

"I fully agree," Kenji offered, beaming until the duke looked at him like he wasn't asked for his opinion, so he harrumphed and added, "I was... happening to get drinks when I overheard their conversation with the royal couple. Anyway, uh...I'm going to just... disappear. Have a good evening."

Finally, Greg thought.

As Kenji left to mingle with other octopuses, Sush turned to Greg. "Was

it the fox? I mean, the queen? Did you have it recorded? A voice recording at least?"

Greg blinked at the first nickname he'd heard from her. "The fox?"

Sush didn't even look sheepish when she defended, "You have to admit - the queen is crafty even before she was crowned."

"Well, she does have a lot to protect so that's probably a prerequisite trait. Many of us from the kingdom are like that. You're like that too, if you haven't noticed."

Waving a hand, Sush readily admitted, "I know. It's probably why between me and her, we have an unspoken love-hate relationship."

"Interesting," Greg noted. He didn't know there was a bond between the women before tonight, though the queen did speak very highly of Sush when the four-month negotiation commenced. He'd always thought it was one-sided.

"So I assume you don't have a recording?" Sush asked, already dejected.

His smile returned, unfiltered amusement lit his face. "I apologize. I didn't think of doing that at the time." The curl of his lips flattened when he asked, "What took you so long to get here, by the way?" The question didn't come out judgmental, it only amplified concern.

"Is it bad to say I didn't want to come?" Sush replied with a smirk.

Chuckling briefly, he ventured, "And what would you rather be doing?"

No one had ever asked her that. Whenever she honestly said that she didn't want to be where she was, the listener would normally ask her to lighten up or keep an open mind, saying that she'd have fun if she let herself enjoy the event. The thing is, even when the events were not horrible, they were not her ideal way to spend her precious hours. She and social events had never been the best fit for one another.

Giving Greg's question some thought, she ultimately said, "Well, before I stepped in through those doors, I've been thinking of heading to the park for a nice stroll. Or over to the archery range to shoot a few arrows,

but I'd have to pay the premium rate since it's late evening. And the place would normally be too crowded at this time to be any fun. Or I could have an early night. Haven't had that in weeks." Staring into space, she concluded, "Actually the last one was the most appealing - an early night."

"Was?" Greg questioned in a whisper, taking a small step closer to not just look at her, but also feel her.

There was no denying it - the pull was there, the pull he'd been feeling since the second week. Her smell, he concluded, was her natural scent. The low voltage passing from her back to his hand that traveled through his body and invaded every cell and vein didn't stem from surface attraction. It was something deeper. He didn't know if this was how a second mate bond was supposed to feel - milder than the first. And he realized that, even if it was, he didn't mind. Even if it was, he felt blessed.

His heart beat for this second chance in ways that it never did for his first, especially when his first had only been a champion in offering heated sex and sultry looks and touches in exchange for his heart, the most vulnerable parts of his soul, and access to the people in his life. Hardly a fair trade.

Sush wasn't asking for anything, but gave him so much more: intriguing conversations, amusing comebacks, glimpses into her innovative mind, her temper, and her vulnerability. He doubted she let anyone see the fear and dismay she showed him in his car the other day, or the sudden shock and anxiety that lasted for mere seconds when they were trapped in the elevator.

She was his, he was sure. He had never been more sure of anything else in his life.

Sush saw it in his eyes - the yearning to hear her next words, the hopeful glint giving away the fact that he'd already had a good guess of how her dread over the gala changed within minutes if not seconds.

It was him. She knew it was him. He probably knew it, too. The way he

looked at her when she entered - mouth agape, eyes zoned in. Desire wasn't just written all over his face, it oozed from his being even from a distance, calling out to her to take notice. It was like she was the only one in the room, the only one that mattered. And she liked it. More than like - she loved it. She loved that he only saw her the way she only saw him.

Her heart implored her to speak, yet one thing - one dreaded thing - now held her words back - the fact that she didn't know whether he'd still see her this way, want her this way if he knew the extent of what she was up to.

Tell him, her naive heart whispered.

He's different. He'll understand, the stupid, illogical part of her soul chimed.

There's a risk: a risk of losing him, a risk of him seeing you differently, her cautious brain echoed. Finally, a part of herself that she could agree with.

Greg's throat bobbed, eyes dimmed from her silence as he took her hands. "Are you alright? You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, you should know that." He wanted her to, yearned for her to, but not until she wanted to, not until she was ready to.

A booming voice from the speakers took their attention from each other as everyone turned to the source - a beaming woman in a glorious red gown.



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The woman in red stood on the steps, introducing herself as the wife of the Minister of Defense, Larissa Ferdinand, and - as if on cue - Ferdinand beamed emptily as his wife of fair skin and dark hair with a winged eyeliner brought the room back to herself.

Flashing those pearly-white teeth with a depth of a smile that mirrored her husband's own, she began, "On behalf of the ministry, I'd like to thank all of you for attending this year. Yes, that includes my own husband."

Barks of laughter followed as Ferdinand feigned embarrassment.

By Sush's ear, Greg muttered, "Can they get anymore perfect for each other?"

Her finger came up, subtly. "You haven't seen everything yet. Keep watching."

"Goddess, help me," he murmured.

Sush reached to her side for a glass, handing it to him, which he accepted without thought when she said, "I'm no goddess but that should help a bit."

A soft chuckle left him, and he pulled her closer, letting their bodies touch and their warmth meet, the trail of electricity spread through them both.

Larissa's voice continued echoing through the hall, "For those wondering why I was late," she sighed, dramatically. "Unlike the men in this room, we ladies have to actually make sure the kids are looked after before we leave the house."

As some laughter came from the crowd to get the men in the room flustered, Sush murmured in Greg's way as he sipped on the drink, "They have two maids: one for the house, one for their two kids. Full

time. Mrs. Ferdinand came into the headquarters once, talked about her children and mistakenly said her younger one was Alexis the entire day when his name is actually Alvise."

Greg snorted into the wine and unintentionally drew attention to himself.

As he attempted to suppress the coughs, Sush plucked the glass off his fingers as she said, "Alright, that was a bad idea."

Her words lifted his lips even when he was still muffling out the coughs.

When he finally got a hold of himself, he skimmed the room to find all eyes on him, but his gaze only lingered only on those who mattered: his mavericks' concerned stares, his cousin's disapproving scowl, his queen's knowing smile as her eyes flickered between him and Sush, the octopuses' puzzled looks, and Larissa Ferdinand's quizzical surprise that - to Greg's own surprise - looked genuine.

Clearing his throat, his confident voice projected, "Please accept my humble apologies, Mrs. Ferdinand. Very rude for me to be sipping on a drink during your speech."

Forcing a smile and not appreciating the interruption because she'd rehearsed for her speech to go smoothly, Larissa replied, "Having heard about you, Your Grace, I suppose I shouldn't expect anything more. As I was saying..."

Many lycans eyes - including the queen's - welcomed shades of onyx at that remark as growls bubbled up their throats.

Greg wasn't going to throw shade, but since the Red Devil had served from her court, he figured it'd be rude not to return the ball, especially when he knew he could deliver a smash. "You were talking about your children, Mrs. Ferdinand. What are their names, if I may ask?"

Sush's head swung to him and her eyes looked like they could set him on fire.

The hunters either stood very still, or nudged one another, as if asking whether he knew about the inside joke. No one outright told the

minister's wife she got the name wrong on that day, but they imagined she discovered it somehow.

Larissa's demeanor morphed from one of quizzical surprise to angered humiliation that lasted a brief moment confirmed she did eventually find out about her blunder. "I'm afraid, for the children's safety, I'm unable to divulge their names in a public setting, Your Grace, as my husband frequently reminds me."

"Ah, of course. How ignorant of me to have asked. My apologies, Mrs. Ferdinand."

Larissa nodded uneasily, turned to look elsewhere, and droned on about how grateful they were to be living at a time of peace and harmony, conveniently failing to mention the murders in the east, the death of Catrine Carter, and the recent massacre in the west.

Sush refused to hand Greg back the glass, holding it away when he tried to reach for it.

At the end of Larissa's speech and during the obligatory applause that followed, Greg finally got back his drink when he murmured, "Maybe she's forgotten both children's names today."

Narrowing her eyes at him, she hissed, "I'm convinced you're trying to get me suspended or fired."

"They won't touch you," he insisted in a low tone, as if promising death if they did.

"That doesn't mean they can't make my life difficult, Greg. Honestly, what were you thinking?"

Chastened now, he said, "I was planning to die of boredom with the rest of the audience, so the impromptu conversation with the Red Devil really was unintended... and admittedly, at your expense. I would apologize but I fully comprehend that an apology is far from sufficient."

Her eyes trained on him, her hard gaze holding his soft, remorseful ones, and she heaved a defeated sigh and uttered, "Next time you want to burn someone with an inside joke, do it far away from me so it

doesn't look like you heard it from me."

"Duly noted. I'll stand next to Valor or Patterson in the future."

"Good," she mused, sipping on her drink.

"And now," Larissa's voice pierced through the speakers again, a glint in her eye that looked genuine, but not encouraging. If anything, those gray eyes looked scheming, even from afar. "In the spirit of diplomacy - between the government and ministry, and that of our neighboring species - let us join hands and share the dance floor. And since the ongoing treaty is only going swimmingly thanks to the Chief Octopus from our side and the leader of the mavericks from the kingdom, I'd say that it's only apt for them to lead the way, wouldn't you?"

Greg did not see the point in that whole thing. The Red Devil was basically asking him and Sush to dance. He would've asked her himself. Why was that conniving gleam dancing in the woman's eyes? It only made his animal want to scratch out her eyeballs.

As he turned to Sush, ready to murmur something sardonic to berate Larissa Ferdinand, he realized he wasn't the devil's target, Sush was.



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His octopus's usually confident frame and posture now shrunk, like she was trying to keep to herself as her eyes - though pinned on Larissa Ferdinand in shock - amplified a need to leave.

Greg's eyes turned onyx and he shot the Ferdinands a glare - which neither of them noticed - before he positioned himself in front of the only one in the room who mattered, blocking her view of the sharks out to gobble her, though he couldn't understand how or why yet.

His hand reached for her face, cupping her cheek, and his voice came in an assuring whisper, "Sush, this is not an obligation. No one is going to die if you refuse. And you're not a politician. You can refuse."

His large frame shadowing over hers offered her cover, made her feel protected, encouraged her to loosen, allowing her to come back from her shrunken posture. "I... don't have a good experience in dancing," she blurted. "The one time I was on the dance floor, I uh... I was being spun around too much, too fast and I... threw up all over the place and on two people and then I... slipped and fell into my own vomit. It was embarrassing. Everyone here knows. I've never been on a dancefloor since."

"So that's the game she's playing," Greg muttered in comprehension, head angling to his side, about to shoot the Red Devil with his most murderous glare and even fire a growl.

But before he could, Sush's grip on the lapel of his coat held him back when she said, "Wait." He did, knowing where his priorities lay, knowing it was with her. He'd think of something for the Red Devil later.

"Can you dance?" she asked.

His brows rose. "I can. What are y—"

"Let's do this. Go easy on the spinning."

"Sush," he stopped her by her waist. "You don't have to do this just to prove it to her. She's a devil, for Goddess's sake."

"It's not about proving it to her." The fierce glint, the sure voice - the ones that made him listen, now continued ringing through his ears. "It's about proving it to myself that no one can use that incident against me again after tonight."

His heart swelled at her insistence, lips curled up at her courage. Stepping back and offering her a proper bow and an outstretched hand like a gentleman, he uttered, "Then allow this professional to show you how proper dancing doesn't induce nausea."

His boastful line brought out her smile, and she whispered, "Show-off."

Greg was glad to see his efforts to distract her were working to a certain extent, but the moment they were on the dance floor, she stiffened, taking breaths that gave away her anxiety of having so many eyes on them.

As Greg guided one of her hands to his shoulder and took the other in his, his free hand resting on her waist, he murmured, "At any time you want to stop, we stop, and we'll try again if you want to, okay?"

She nodded, forcing a smile. The music began and they started slow. From the way Sush tried to keep track of every part of her that moved when they began, Greg gathered she wasn't one who enjoyed expressing herself with her body, but as they swayed, he felt her leaning into the idea, leaning into him, trusting him and relinquishing control. Greg gradually increased the pacing as she loosened.

Sush forbade herself from looking anywhere else, focusing on his eyes - the way his gaze shielded her from the stares, from the murmurs that she wasn't hearing because her attention was only on Greg and on not messing up.

"Ready?" Greg whispered.

And she knew what he meant. The quicker they got through this, the less anxious she'd be waiting for it to come. So she nodded, bracing

herself.

Greg drew their joined hands up and sent her into a graceful pirouette, bringing her back into him, which was when a relieved smile played on her lips and she uttered, "That was actually alright... Better than alright, even."

His own anxiousness vaporized with those words and he beamed, lighting up by seeing her light up. "I'm betting your previous dance partner was an amateur."

"A humble one, though," she made it a point to note.

Spinning her around for the second time, he then responded, "With an aptitude like that, he had no choice but to be humble."

She chuckled, all fear forgotten, anxiety washed away. She didn't even notice the unnerving stares anymore.

And the Red Devil just had to ruin their momentum by speaking through the microphone again, in an annoying high-pitch cheery voice that carried a tinge of jealousy when it echoed, "Well, would you look at that, ladies and gentlemen - the show that no one expected!"

It would have passed off as an encouraging, innocuous statement if the tone didn't carry the scorn that it did, especially at the word "show".

The spite of this woman knew no limits, Greg thought. This wasn't a show. It was a special moment he was sharing with the one he intended to make his.

Sush heard Larissa, heard the jab in those words, and chose not to care, reminded herself she didn't need to care. She overcame her fear of putting herself on the dance floor and actually dancing in public tonight. That itself was something not even the worst people in the room could take away from her.

Greg, on the other hand, was born not to turn the other cheek, so his mental gears spun, thinking of a sardonic comeback.

But someone beat him to it.