

Chapter 25

Back in the trenches, Greg popped from correspondence to system maintenance to weaponry maintenance when he heard her sigh. It was as if his auditory nerves had been programmed to listen for that sound. His ears perked, his skimming of the inventory list paused, his chin lifted. He watched as Sush dumped the clipboard next to the keyboard as she slumped into her swivel chair, brows furrowed and mouth downturned in a frown as she scrolled through her phone.

Setting the list in his hand onto his chair, he strode across the space, toward the elevator, jabbed the number six, tapped his foot impatiently against the ground as he waited for the elevator bell to chime faintly, stepped onto the cafeteria floor and made a beeline for the coffee bar.

Nancy looked up from her phone when Greg asked, "What does the Chief Octopus normally take when she looks like she's about to yell at someone?"

Nancy's curious expression turned apprehensive. "What did you do?"

"I highly doubt it's me. If it were, she would've said it to my face as she does with everyone. Do you know what she takes when she's like that? Just coffee, something ice-blended, something sweet?"

"Uh, so she's frustrated, right?"

"Seems like it."

"Alrighty." Nancy moved to the display case and placed two cream puffs into a white paper box. Folding the lid inward, she explained, "Sush doesn't take more caffeine when she's stressed like that. In the last few months when she looked like she was losing it, I normally treated her to one of these babies or matcha cupcakes. Since the

cupcakes are sold out, this is our only option." As Nancy jabbed the numbers on the cash register, she asked, "She sent you to get them?"

"No," Greg replied curtly, placing a note on the counter and saying, "Keep the change."

Nancy took the cash. The corner of her lips twitched up. "Thank you. For taking care of her. She needs it, as much as she denies it."

Taking care of her. Those four words did something to his mind, his heart. Was he taking care of her?

Not knowing how to respond, he merely offered a firm nod and left at a brisk pace. In the elevator, he thought about what Nancy said: she needs it, as much as she denies it. The barista weaved his simple gesture in such an inappropriately intimate way. This was just a snack, something to... to what? To make sure she was alright? Because if she wasn't then the smooth-sailing extraction of hunter intelligence would be compromised?

Yes, yes. He couldn't have that. That was the point of the cream puffs. It wasn't anything more. It couldn't be anything more. His last encounter with a huntress did not go well and he made it a point to draw a very clear line that he'd never cross again.

But that didn't mean he should close off professional prospects in this world. He'd seen the systems and inventories and it was promising. Just because one huntress finagled him, it didn't mean he should eradicate learning from them, especially not from her - the most luminous one of all.

Greg hadn't noticed the slight tug of his lips until he took notice of his reflection when the elevator bell chimed. Pulling the corner back down to form a flat line, he cleared his throat and exited, heading straight for the chief who didn't look like she was going to yell at someone anymore. In fact, she looked like she was going to execute the murders

of more than one creature as the scrolling of her phone continued. And she wore that look so damn well that it was getting more difficult not to smile from witnessing that sight.

Settling the box on the only empty spot he could find on her paper-filled space, he said, "Eat first, then kill. It's more effective. I speak from experience."

Sush's brows were still arched deep when her eyes rose to meet his. The ocean of frustration in her orbs welcomed a fragment of relief. Noting the familiar box, she reached for it and set it on her lap. "Oh, good. Another bribe. I really need this right now. Did Nancy help you again?"

"She did." He leaned against the desk, conveying her movements to memory: the way she took her time looking for the end of the tape, the manner her fingernail scratched at the corner when she found it, the spark of excitement in her eyes as the tape came loose and she opened the lid. Observing her was therapeutic, almost as therapeutic as... Oh no.

No, no, no.

He forbade himself from thinking about Izabella. Observing her and finding that therapeutic had been a big mistake, one he did not intend to repeat.

His eyes tore away right before Sush beamed at the sight of the cream puffs. He forcefully curled his tongue inward to stop himself from speaking until he'd run his sentences through his brain at least three times. Pushing himself off her desk, he said, "I'm headed back to the inventory section."

"Mm, wait." The force of her voice, though there was actually no force to the normal creature, pulled him to a halt. Getting her phone, Sush unlocked, swiped and handed her device and the box with the second

cream puff to him. "You'll need this more than I do after reading that."

Pushing herself off her seat to wash her hands, Greg held her phone in one hand and the paper box in the other. The email was about the Monica Upshaw query. Sush sent an email the previous day and had just asked for a follow-up. The response she got was that Upshaw had been exempted for a reason that couldn't be disclosed in the interest of national security, which the hunters had no jurisdiction to question.

"Told you you'll need the puff." Sush's taunting voice pulled his onyx gaze from the screen, smirking as she sank back into her chair, bringing some lilac shades back into his eyes.

"National security? Aren't all of you here the ones steering the wheels of national security?" he snapped.

Her index finger came up. "That's flattering, Your Grace. You're forgetting the soldiers."

"Not. Funny."

Her lips pressed down and her head slowly swung side-to-side. "Wasn't a joke to begin with."

Heaving a deep sigh, reining his anger, he then asked, "The face-to-face meeting you're demanding in your response to the email - what are the odds of them granting it?"

"Zero point one percent."

"Excuse me?"

"I honestly don't know, Your Grace. I've never done anything like this. The last time something like this happened, my predecessor did nothing. I have no precedent to follow here so expect a lot of trials and errors as this moves forward. Have you seen my noble leader's separate email to me, by the way?"

He hadn't. Tapping the back button and finding the first

correspondence on top, Greg seethed when Valor essentially told her to stop pursuing the matter, adding that it wouldn't end well for her. "Is this a threat?" he questioned.

"Yes. Another empty one. He can't get rid of me that easily. I got in without his vote anyway. The tricky part now is to get what I want without pissing off the rest who did vote for me."

"I suppose that means I can't get involved."

"You can." A glint in her eye appeared when she went on, "If they fire me, you'll have a new chief to correspond with, which would most likely be Haz—"

"Don't," Greg interjected. "Stop there. I fully comprehend the direness of this situation."

Sush chuckled briefly. His revulsion to her deputy was comical. Eyeing the paperbox, she asked, "You are going to eat that, right?"

Handing her the box and phone, he replied, "It'll take more than a pastry ball to cool me off."

Reaccepting the puff, she bit into the second puff and her eyes darted back to the computer screen when she said through mouthfuls, "Mm. Maybe what you need to cool off is something that is actually cold, like an iced latt—"

She felt a gust of wind, and when she turned, Greg had already disappeared. Her head craned and spun around the trenches, scouring, and found him back at the inventory section. A folder already in his hands. Their eyes met briefly and Sush's lips tugged upward in a knowing smile, a gesture that Greg's lips matched as he shook his head.

Hazel witnessed the exchange, growing conflicted, wondering if this changed things.