

Chapter 27

The latter two questions had been answered by an autopsy report and confirmed by the eastern octopuses: the sprinklers were not turned on from the control room, meaning it could've only been switched on by an external source. They traced it to an unauthorized wireless device, suspecting that the intruder had a remote in his trousers pocket that managed the feat.

As for the screaming, the sprinklers sprayed - not water - but zahar: an air-borne substance that tampers with its victim's neurons. They'd feel as if a million needles were being pierced through their skin, causing momentary paralysis while their assailant struck. Zahar wasn't lethal in open spaces, but it did buy time.

Why wasn't the assailant himself affected? The octopuses concluded that either he had already ingested an antidote or he wasn't human. Zahar didn't affect lycans, werewolves or vampires, so no one ruled out that the intruder could be one of their neighboring species.

When a five-foot-two eastern octopus made this suggestion, she warily glanced at the three lycans, which triggered Greg to say, "Of course. Why wouldn't we want to kill six archers when the conspiracy against our kind was led by two chameleons? And of course we'd resort to attacking the east when our problems stemmed from the west. Who knows what we'd do next? Detonate the eastern trenches, perhaps."

His sardonic response at the illogicality of the eastern hunters' suspicions was not well received. Sush was the only human who wasn't fearful of their safety in the duke's presence by then. Despite her fatigue, she could still tell when he was and wasn't serious. If he was serious, he'd just do it - like how he killed Izabella. He wouldn't bother

making an announcement.

Sush's firm voice permeated through the skeptical silence, speaking directly to Kenji and the five eastern octopuses, "There was an extensive, four-month investigation and back-and-forth negotiation before the execution of our western members was passed, and punishment was confined to them. If you suspect the imposter may be a lycan, it is unlikely that he or she was sent by the kingdom. They wouldn't skip through the procedure."

"Wasn't Delilah executed prior to any procedure, Sush?" Kenji reminded, drawing a snarl from Greg's lycan for two reasons: one, this dickhead probably spearheaded the thought that lycans were behind the assassination; two, he had the gall to call the chief by name. And the tone he used. Goddess, Greg could tear out the hunter's voice box for just that.

Sush eyed Kenji, a warning glint evident in her eyes when she replied, "Yes, and - for your sake - I hope you know why."

A lump followed the wave-like muscle contractions of his throat, headed downward. Every hunter knew the execution of Izabella Delilah had been legal. There was long-established legislation that allowed foreign species to execute an imposter the moment irrefutable evidence surfaced. It was created to secure one's territory and was neither amended nor repealed. It was deplorable for any hunter not to know this. Kenji was the Head Octopus of the east. He definitely knew it.

"That aside," Sush moved on. "Has anything been taken from the headquarters or inventory?"

The five-foot-two octopus, Mei Ling, reported, "Our team detected an intrusion on PC 3A. Six folders were opened. However, they contain very different content. We failed to find a connection, Chief."

"Flag them. I'll check from my end. For now, report to the government

that their water sources have been compromised seeing the water from the sprinklers comes from their source. Ask for footage to see if there has been tampering. I want a list of employees overlooking the water system in the past month. And go through the list of thugs, especially the latest ones." Thugs were hunters who were either dismissed or had resigned and gone rogue. They weren't as common as rogues and proditors, but existed nonetheless.

"How did the intruder get in to reach the computer, by the way?" Sush asked.

Mei Ling explained, "One of our colleague's access cards was used, Chief. He reported it being stolen six minutes before the incident, and recalled someone knocking into him on his walk home, so we suspect it was picked out of his pocket during the collision."

"Any footage verifying that?"

Her head shook solemnly.

"Alright. I need one more thing," Sush's eyes skidded across the row of monitors. "The clock in and out data - sync it with the west."

Mei Ling was jotting down the demands before her stylus pen halted.

Kenji's brows knitted, his voice laced with a hint of anger, taking umbrage at the chief's suggestion. "With respect, Sush, I doubt it's one of our own. No access cards need to be stolen if it was. And there clearly hasn't been traces of our files being hacked into seeing it was opened directly. Our security systems are the most sophisticated and thorough one to date, even better than - forgive me for saying this - the one in the west."

Greg scoffed. "Funny how the sophistication couldn't prevent six deaths and an intrusion."

Sush released a sigh, turned to Greg, and said, "Your Grace, I know you

don't care if I say this, but I'm really tired. If you could make things easier by not trying to start a stir that I'd have to mellow out, I'd appreciate it."

Uneasiness curbed the remaining disparaging comments the duke had for the eastern octopuses. His stomach coiled when she said he wouldn't care. It sounded so wrong that it was eating him alive. How could he not care? It was as difficult to see her tired as it was to see her being questioned by her fucking subordinates.

Sush diverted her attention back to Kenji and noted, "I didn't ask you whether it was one of yours, Kenji. And I didn't ask about the advancement of your systems. As chief, I'm instructing you to have the data I need synced. I hope that won't be an issue."

Swallowing another lump in his throat, he responded meekly, "It won't be. You'll have everything within the next twenty-four hours."

"Two hours. Not more. You're just transferring and flagging data. Any longer and it'd raise suspicions of fabrication. Not with me, but with the higher-ups if this escalates to them. I'm not taking any chances." With that, Sush strode off before further negotiations began. The westerners were at her heels, leaving the lair with her.

Mei Ling and her colleagues delegated the tasks and got to work while Greg threw one final scowl at Kenji before he left.



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