

# The Indomitable Huntress And the Hardened Duke

## Chapter 21

Sushmita reached her one-bedroom apartment after midnight. Lying in bed and staring into the darkness that jeeringly matched her life, she kept telling her body to go to sleep. But it couldn't. Her energy levels would normally be wiped out by now and she may not even remember her head touching the pillow or whether she pulled up the blankets. But tonight, she even had the mental and physical strength to charge her phone.

Yes, she knew it wasn't good for the battery. No, she didn't care.

Her brain was still buzzing, nerves still firing. From Delilah to Valor to Catrine Carter to Monica Upshaw and... to Greg. Why Greg? She delved deeper into that.

Unlike the catastrophe of a person she'd imagined, he actually seemed... decent. Not a choice of word she'd go for from the little she knew about him before today, especially not after the way he ended Logan Larson. She should be terrified from witnessing the kill, but she actually felt envious that Greg was granted permission to do something she wanted to do but couldn't without breaking hunter codes and the law. Larson was one of the five people who started the shit and gave her and the other octopuses hell anyway. The duke wasn't in his best composure during the execution, but Sushmita didn't assume the worst of him just from that one day.

From the unflattering articles that mushroomed about his past when he went public with Delilah, Greg Claw was presented to be ruthless and temperamental, dangerous and unreliable.

The number of such articles didn't dwindle even when the king and queen were asked to comment. Their joint reply was brief, stating that the duke's misdeeds may have left a mark, but the fact that His Grace had been instrumental in eradicating threats in recent years had left an equal, if not more, impactful legacy.

Reporters began writing about the cousins' animus, even questioning whether the kingdom was stable now that they purported to be working together. This was when several reached out to the more popular ruler - the queen - for her own comment, asking specifically about the friction between her mate and cousin-in-law, and the fox left a few words on her normally-uneventful social media account, "It's enlightening to know that a significant segment of today's precocious journalists have impliedly welcomed others to judge them based on their pasts, just as their work does for others. The unjustified derisive narrative on outdated facts brings such clarity to each writer's own character, exemplifies their finesse in staying stuck in bygone times, and speaks volumes about their future in journalism."

That burn didn't just drive up shares and reactions, it scalded many rising journalists. And the queen's statement escalated to a degree that no one had expected, not even the queen herself. Former classmates and acquaintances who shared animosity with those journalists dug into the past and shared

embarrassing tales that any reasonable creature would rather keep buried.

One journalist was reported to have suffered a nervous breakdown after pictures of her cozying up with her professor resurfaced and went viral, the caption unhelpfully adding that she scored a distinction in the subject but the grade was later revoked when the matter came to light. Another journalist - who was married with a pup - was suspended pending an investigation when someone disclosed she'd been sexually harassed by him back in college, as were many of her female classmates. And no less than twenty editors were demoted for greenlighting stories with an "unjustified derisive narrative" that - the news agencies claimed - was not what they stood for.

The human instinct - not their animals, who were genetically programmed to bow to their rulers - was to get back at the queen, but everyone knew better than to do that, especially when the king's threat to one of their own several years back marked the profession like a permanent tattoo. The consequences would be more lethal professionally and swifter than a few lines going viral on social media. So the matter was put to rest and only objective, well-balanced articles survived, which wasn't many of them. There were only three, if Sush wasn't mistaken. Out of hundreds.

When the saga made headlines in the human world, almost everyone got invested. Sush included, raising her to-go coffee cup to Lucy's statement when she read it over lunch, finding humor in those words since she wasn't at the receiving end.

Sush sensed then - just as she was sure now - the duke's character wasn't fully captured by the media. She may not know the duke, but she knew the queen. That woman may be nice to anyone in general - provided one didn't piss her off - but she was highly selective of her inner circle. If the duke was in her inner circle now, it only meant he was - at the very least - tolerable.

And Sush had to admit he was. Better than tolerable, in fact. She enjoyed their conversation after lunch, as dead as his tone was. The thing about tone was that one's choice of words could set an entire sentence ablaze without minding intonation. He was living proof of that.

Sush was brought up in an expressive household. Voices were raised when there was either excitement, anger or distance between the ones speaking and listening; tone was lowered to express guilt or tell a secret. Even their hands and arms did a litany of exercises when they spoke: the index finger is pointed when a point was being made; the lowering of one's head with one hand inches from their face meant the situation being told was dire; a wave of a hand at roughly forty-five-degree angle over a surface was most likely accompanied with a no; both hands and directed toward something meant This! And the list went on.

Sush was considered the least expressive in her family, having been to schools and met people who gawked awkwardly at her if her hands flew out of the cultural circumference per individual and moved beyond the unspoken quota for the day or on an occasion that didn't customarily invoke such a

reaction.

She still used her hands and arms, but her movements were more controlled than her late mother and deceased relatives. Being older now, she didn't care if people gawked at her. A part of her even felt she was honoring them by simply letting her forelimbs fly.

Greg was so different. So stiff. So controlled. Any movement he made - so far - seemed minimal and calculated. The most impactful hand exercise he had was probably pinching his forehead or nose bridge.

It was astounding that he hadn't filed a complaint against her just for her excessive hand gestures yet. Maybe he would. Tomorrow. Or another day. He had three months anyway. There was no rush.

For a reason not yet clear to Sush, she replayed their after-lunch conversation and - halfway through - her mind was finally put to rest.



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