

The Indomitable Huntress And the Hardened Duke

Chapter 22

"Did you know he threw the iced latte right down the sink?" Hazel whispered like a flood just swept away an entire village.

"Really? I didn't think someone like him would drain a cup before throwing it into the trash. Ow! Hazel!" Sush flinched when her deputy struck her arm with a thick ring folder.

Sulking in her chair and tucking the folder back under her tablet on her lap, Hazel said, "You're usually funny when you're mean, but not this time."

Rubbing away the sensation from the blow, Sush said, "Maybe the duke's just here to work, Haze. How about you give him a pass? It's not like you don't have other offers. And pull up B-12 for me, please."

Tapping on her keyboard, she complained, "No offers or prospects can beat him."

"You just met him. Yesterday," Sush noted pointedly.

"Exactly! And he's already ticked all my boxes!"

Brows furrowing like a judgmental mother, Sush uttered, "I'm rather concerned about what those boxes entail if they can all be ticked in one day, Hazel."

"A handsome face, a Greek God body, a panty-dropping voice, and a job with enough money. Oh, and one to make pretty babies with," Hazel listed casually. Too casually.

For the first time in years, Sush had no idea how to respond. Her mind shut down for half a minute before it rebooted. "You did not just tell me that."

Hazel shrugged. "I want pretty babies. And a job with enough money is important. I have a job with enough money. I don't see why my future partner shouldn't be the same."

"I agree," Sush then lowered her voice into a hush like they were sharing nuclear codes. "But the rest of the list could be left out by hitting me with two words - it's private."

Hazel shrugged again, this time with a gleam in her eye. "You asked, boss."

Sush sighed and murmured, "Oh my god. I am never asking you any personal questions again."

"C'mon, friends talk about these things. What's on your list?"

"Wh— No."

"I told you mine."

"Honestly, it was a test. And you failed. Horribly. You shouldn't be that specific. While we're on it, your list should be longer, with more desired personality traits. Maybe with a dash of common ground. Now, where's my B-12?"

"Ugh," Hazel groaned.

While waiting, Sush couldn't help but mentally review Hazel's list again. God, why did Hazel have to tell her that? Why did she ask in the first place? The frank answers were now etched to the walls on her mind and Sush didn't know how to get

them off. It was easy to see Hazel wanting those things.

In another time, one before Sush knew about the hunters, before she became one and learned its secrets - buried and unburied - she'd desired those things in a partner too, save for the pretty babies part. She'd never been particularly keen on having children. She didn't hate kids, but she never saw herself as needing to have them, never saw herself as a mother - a personal preference and choice that, unfortunately, some people still think they had a say in.

Hazel's mind was no longer on her list as she thought of Greg's lack of reciprocity again, still mourning the thrown-out latte. "I can't believe he did that. He could've just told me he didn't like it."

Blinking out of her thoughts, Sush replied, "I thought he did."

"I mean, yeah, he did. But I thought he was just being nice and shy about accepting a drink from a stranger he met on the first day. He could have told me he actually didn't like it, you know? I could've ordered something else for him. What do you think he likes?"

The previous day's conversation with Greg flashed into Sush's mind like a thunderbolt, and she had to bite the inner corners of her lips to feign contemplation and force down a smile. Greg said not to give Hazel any ideas, but there was an itch to do just that, just to see how he'd react.

Then again, Sush herself wouldn't appreciate it if an admirer she wasn't interested in got inside information from people she trusted with the small details of her life - not that she had

any admirers to begin with, or people she trusted with the small details of her life - but the logic still applied.

In the end, Sush said, "Maybe you can just ask him?" Yes, that was a safe answer, she thought.

But as the thought came, so did something else - something in her gut telling her that it felt wrong, though Sush couldn't yet comprehend how. She didn't divulge anything so she wasn't betraying Greg per se, nor was she discouraging her friend from pursuing the person she seemed to be interested in, despite the questionable boxes she had drawn up. She was being supportive of her friend and keeping Greg's petty secret.

Which part of that was even wrong? And why did she feel a slight, uncomfortable heat at the pit of her stomach at the thought of Hazel going after Greg?

Catching her thoughts drifting like wood to the crest of a waterfall, her sudden awareness halted the current and reined in her focus, directing it to the hologram finally set before her eyes.

Hazel drew up B-12: the territory where Monica Upshaw was supposed to guard with fourteen others. Sushmita was wondering if the shortage of one would require an immediate replacement. The perimeter was considerably large but the rate of danger was low, so her tentative plan was to leave it at fourteen. If she wanted fifteen, it'd give rise to another problem of where to get another archer from. This site hadn't had an issue in three years. It should be safe.

"Morning, Chief." The voice - deep and sure - reverberated into

her eardrums. And it did something to her heart. It moved? No, that wasn't the correct word. The heart was held by vessels. It couldn't just move. So it...what? Vibrated? Jumped? Whatever he did, it was strange that she reacted that way.

Hazel, who was slumped lazily like she had no reason left to live, was jostled by Greg's voice and became fully ready to spread her contagious light to the rest of the world. With starry eyes, she chirped, "Good morning, Your Grace. Beautiful day, isn't it? There was even a rainbow earlier this morning. I got a picture. Wanna see?"

Greg's throat worked before he delivered a curt, "No."

"Oh," Hazel's swift swiping came to an abrupt pause. "You don't like rainbows?"

Sush snorted. She couldn't help it. She'd been holding onto that since Hazel wondered about what he liked to drink. When she realized Hazel's eyes were on her, she cleared her throat. "Sorry, something in my throat. I think we can leave B-12 as it is. Let's review Abbott's proposals that came in yesterday."

Hazel reluctantly turned her attention back to the tablet, sighing like she'd been working hard all day when it had only been twenty minutes, tops.



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