

Chapter 28

The following day, Sush was scrutinizing each flagged file. Frustration filled her when formatting issues disturbed her flow. These were very old files overseen by Kenji's predecessor, who wasn't exactly the most efficient or thorough octopus, so Sush supposed she should have expected half-baked work like these. It really bothered her, but since the retired hunter was not within her vicinity to be yelled at, all she could do was sigh to herself as she perfected the documents by correcting each formatting issue that didn't conform to the standard way they did things.

These old timers, she thought to herself in dismay.

Her flow got better, until one broke her momentum - an archive from over a decade ago about the remnants of a victim suspected to have been bombed. Her eyes trailed along each line, each photo. Her heart raced, sweat beaded on her forehead, the rise and fall of her chest grew more frequent as her breathing shallowed.

"Sush?" The voice, careful and gentle, pulled her back to reality.

This wasn't the first time something like this happened. The first time was when she learned about this method of killing. Over the years, when she thought about the incident, her stability would waiver, the dauntlessness in her would vanish, her heart would pump faster to cause a stampede within her blood vessels. Over the years, someone would catch her in this panic. Her eyes would swing to them, vulnerable and afraid. They would comfort her, sympathize with her or use this against her. Over the years, she taught herself to wait before looking anywhere, to close her eyes, inhale, count to ten, remember who she was, how far she'd come, where she'd planned to go. Only then would

she face the witness to her panic.

"Sush, are you okay? Hey." The gentle voice drew closer, so did his hand.

Sush's reflexes made her lean away, her swivel chair created a distance that the hand was closing. She met a set of triangular eyes staring back at her and the first words that spilled from her mouth were, "What are you doing here?"

Kenji's brows rose. "Nice to see you too. Are you okay? You look like you were having a panic attack."

"Nah," she fibbed, waving a hand to substantiate the lie. "Was just thinking about a nightmare I had before I woke up on the floor."

The valley between Kenji's brows narrowed, his posture curved, leaning toward her and his whisper emanated concern when he asked, "You still get nightmares?"

Her right shoulder lifted and fell. "Everyone does, Kenji. Don't make a big deal out of it. Now, back to my question: why are you here? I don't recall approving your transfer from the east."

That drew a short chuckle out of him. Straightening his spine, he set a brown paper bag Sush didn't see him holding on her desk. "I uh... felt really bad about yesterday. I didn't mean to question your order. It just..." he sighed. "I guess we're all under a lot of pressure after what happened. Valor is already questioning my competence, so I got defensive when you asked for the clock in and out data. I overreacted. And I'm sorry." Pushing the bag toward her, he spoke with visible anxiety, "I hope you still like the matcha cupcakes from upstairs."

"I do. Thanks, Kenji. How are the rest in the east?"

Folding his arms and face crumpled in uneasiness, he admitted, "Pretty shaken, to be honest. The archers are already admonishing us. I just

had a row with Asahi this morning. He's panicking. I've never seen him panic."

"Well, as the head of the eastern archers, those were his people."

Sombreness deluged his eyes in a way that was impossible to miss. The frown only added to show how hard the murders had been on him as well. "They were our people too, Sush. I don't take this lightly. I doubt you do either. Asahi had no right to think the octopuses didn't give their all. And then there's Valor..." he checked his wrist watch. "... who I have to see in five minutes so I'd better make a move. Again, I'm sorry for yesterday. Won't happen again. Have a good day and let me know if there are any updates at your end."

"Good luck," Sush uttered ominously, knowing that if there was one thing that Valor could do, it was to make them feel worse when they already felt bad.

Smiling meekly, he uttered, "Thank you. I'll need it."

Her eyes followed him until he entered the elevator. When the metal doors closed, they gave each other a brief wave before Kenji disappeared from view.

"So why didn't it work?" Greg's cold voice made Sush jump in her seat.

Hand over her heart, she sighed and hissed, "Jeez, you should wear a bell, Your Grace."

"Hm." He placed a bag similar to Kenji's on her desk, and Sush oddly forgot about the one Kenji brought and set Greg's bag on her lap, opening it. "Oh, I can get used to this. What's the bribe today?"

"The same as your ex-boyfriend's, I gather."

She opened the box and he was right. Well, almost. Kenji's box was smaller, which would only fit one cupcake this size. Greg got her two. He entered the trenches with the treats when he saw Kenji speaking to

her, so he stayed within their vicinity and eavesdropped like the gentleman that he wasn't.

As Sush licked the green frosting, she said, "You know, I don't think you made a very good deal. Hazel seems to have given up, so it'll be easier to keep her away from you now. You practically have to treat me for nothing in return."

"I'm not taking any chances," Greg uttered, more relaxed, now leaning against her desk with his arms crossed.

It was the first time Sush noticed his arms. The way they filled out his sleeves and looked like they were going to rupture the seams caught her eye, even though this wasn't the first time he'd stood this close. Why hadn't she noticed it before? Hazel was right, the bulges were distinct. It was hard not to look.

"So why didn't it work?" he demanded, less icily.

"Why didn't what work?" Sush questioned, lost and flustered.

A thread of humor weaved into him, evident from the smile he was suppressing. "The thing you had with Mr. Sophisticated. Why didn't it work?"

"Oh. Didn't take you for being nosy." Sush took a bite into the cupcake because licking the frosting seemed inappropriate now. "Long distance. Kenji was from here before his promotion sent him to the east. I thought of applying for a transfer but I preferred the environment here so I stayed. The work demands and distance didn't offer the luxury of quality time so we decided the relationship ran its course. If you were hoping for a dramatic breakup story, I'll have to disappoint you. We parted on good terms."