

# The Indomitable Huntress & the Hardened Duke Novel

## Chapter 31

Sush was in a simulator on the archer's floor, versatile earplugs stuck into each ear and a twelve-gauge shotgun in hand. Eyewear that brought out the simulation and protected her sight painted a shade of violet over her eyes. The archer behind the control panel, Millicent, gave her a thumbs up from behind the glass partition, signaling that the simulation was about to begin.

Millicent faded away, as did the control room.

Darkness sunk, and for a moment, there was nothing. As Sush's eyes adjusted, her surroundings welcomed her in strides. Leaves rustled from the high trees with branches flung wide, branches that seemed to nearly touch yet ultimately grew parallel to its neighboring limb, almost as if nature forbade them from ever meeting. Breezy fingers of the forest grazed her cheek as the crickets serenaded like a hectic first rehearsal rather than a ready performance.

A steady burble of running water became Sush's due north, and her head swung like a slow pendulum from side to side before picking up her feet, the grass susurrating underfoot as she padded across the trees until the water became too loud to ignore. There, she used a tree trunk as cover, then another, and another, becoming more vigilant with each step. The last time she did this, a lycan came growling from the high branches, so her eyes instinctively scanned not just the ground, but the trees, especially the one she was under.

When there was nothing, her neck craned to study the river. The bushes fizzled and moved, and it wasn't by the wind. Sush lowered herself into a squat, gun held to her side. Then, a brown wolf that couldn't be older than twenty-five emerged. It was cautious, face popping from the

leaves before its whole body came through. It didn't spot Sush, whose muzzle now steadied into an aim.

This was the hunters' territory. Any wolf who trespassed was a rogue and the hunters were given full liberty to shoot, as agreed with the kingdom years ago.

Sush's fingers at the trigger tightened and just as the animal's tongue took the first lap of water, she fired. A clean shot. A quick death. The creature didn't even howl. Several archers had taught her to shoot at a certain part for a certain type of howl, some even took the pleasure of hearing each one. But she had always aimed for silence. A smile gleamed her lips when she got it.

But then, her ears caught something.

A snap, some rustling. Both sounds caught in a repetitive cycle that was getting louder.

Her head turned, her gaze pivoted and she came face-to-face with a seven-foot lycan that hadn't growled until now. Its hand swung high from the back, claws extended in a sleek motion and flew at Sush, who dodged the attack by rolling away. Far away. On her abdomen, she didn't bother getting up before aiming at the lycan and delivering her shot. Its howl pierced through her ears, gnawing at her chest as she fired another shot, but she missed as it dug out the bullet.

She swapped the normal bullets for oleander ones, and the lycan lunged at her when she had just loaded the magazine. Her overall posture and fingers counted on muscle memory and fired. The creature whimpered before falling on her with a thud.

Dragging herself off the dead creature and reloading, her senses jolted when she heard a scream - a human's scream. The discerning voice gravitated her body before her mind could keep up. Her heart thumped faster when multiple growls came from the same direction as her feet

hit the ground in quicker paces.

"Help! Help! someBoDY help! AhHhhh!" The voice, distorted somewhere in the middle, came, and Sush continued sprinting as she made a mental note to have the earplugs taken back to the trenches for maintenance.

The moment Sush was within range, she took less than a second to aim and fire, dismissing the howl and firing again until the first wolf was dead, then the second one which was running away. The third one had begun tearing through the flesh of its prey when Sush fired a clean shot. Then, there was nothing but silence.

Sush waited two whole seconds before sprinting to the victim. She was probably in her early twenties, her dark hair sprawled on the ground, face filled with red scratches and eyes wide, staring into emptiness. A blotch of red blossomed from her chest where parts her flesh and ribs were exposed, and the sight had Sush kneeling, tears stinging her eyes.

The dead girl faded into darkness, as did everything else.

Sush hoisted herself to her feet, waiting for the familiar walls to emerge and the first thing that welcomed her back to reality wasn't the blue eyes of Millicent, but the mystifying lilac ones of Greg, which didn't feel like they were looking at her, but looking into her.

"Round four or break for the day, Sush?" Millicent's familiar voice came through the versatile earplugs that simulated the sounds in her weekly practice and conveyed messages from the control room.

"Break," Sush said, tearing her gaze away from Greg like it never fell on him.

Exiting through the door, handing the gun to the next person and taking off the protective gear, she sank onto the bench and swapped hunting shoes for her usual ones, readying herself for a cordial conversation with the person approaching her in strides that boasted his confidence,

the click of his shoes that enunciated his domineering presence.

"Morning, Chief," Greg began.

"Morning, Duke."

Greg would've cackled if she didn't sound so... withdrawn, maybe even a little dismissive. "Are you alright?"

"I just failed to save a civilian, so yeah, I'm doing swell."

"It was a simulation, Sush," Greg noted pointedly. The sound of her name from his lips sounded smooth. Too smooth. Like caramel flowing down ice-cream. She liked it a little too much. Receiving no response, he added, "And Millicent said you beat your own record from last week. Shouldn't that warrant a celebration?"

Her head swung to him. "You know Millicent?"

"She was controlling the simulation and we spoke briefly, so we're acquainted."

She scoffed. "Would've thought you'd give her an offensive nickname like you do everyone else."

His hands went to his pockets, and it made him look more attractive in a way that should be illegal. Smirking, he said, "Not everyone is vexing enough to qualify for a nickname. And don't change the subject: why are you upset? It was fake. You know it was fake. I would've understood frustration but not exactly distress."

"How about this, Your Grace?" She stood, handed the shoes to the archer on duty and strode down the corridor, Greg keeping up with ease as she questioned, "Why is it so important for you to know?"

His tongue in his mouth rolled. The words were at the back of his throat, demanding they'd be set free. The brain was customs, checking the contents and forbidding their exit. Ultimately, he swallowed and said, "I thought we'd be allies by now."

Allies? Her brows rose at his choice of word. "And allies tell each other if something upsets them? Really?"

"Yes," Greg noted, not saying more, not trusting himself to say more. He didn't want to create a loophole he couldn't cover on time.

Sush uttered, "Well, it might be like that in your circle back in the kingdom. But here, unless our emotions get in the way of the work, we neither talk nor ask about it. And the hunters who qualify already passed the test of emotional control. Which means I have, too. I'm fine."

"I just thought you needed to get something off your chest. My apologies if there was a misinterpretation."

He was hoping she'd open up to him, tell him the reason for the tears he saw behind her eyes when their gaze locked. He assumed it had something to do with a real life experience, or something within the simulation that brought back memories of a trauma, or something about her mother, perhaps. She seemed close to her maternal side of the family until they were gone. He almost brought up her mother but held back when it felt like she was guarding that door with her life. If this was what she wanted, he wouldn't push her. He wouldn't force her to say or do anything. He doubted he could ever.

An awkward silence unfurled between them until Greg's voice permeated, uttering, "I'll be around here with the archers for half the day. See you in the trenches later." He turned on his heels, but before taking the first step, he said, "I almost forgot: the queen sends her regards." Then, he left, and Sush was left discombobulated as she watched his retreating figure, an irritating want spiraling through her before she forced herself to look the other way and leave, not knowing that Greg stole a glance of her as he turned around the corner.

Back in the trenches, at her desk, she found a familiar brown paper bag

in its usual spot. The waft of bagels made her mouth water and there was something new - a grilled chicken sandwich in a transparent, rectangular plastic box. The scrawl in black marker read: in case you're getting sick of bagels.

She hated it. She hated that it made her soften when it shouldn't; mellowed her anger and annoyance when it wasn't supposed to; and made her heart melt and soar at the same time.

How was his sweetheart back home okay with him buying lunch for another woman everyday? Opening up to allies about one's feelings was still a plausible step, but this? Uh-uh. There was no way. Those animals were possessive by nature. There was no way any woman would be okay when her man offered a gesture like this to another female. She wasn't an animal and even she wouldn't be okay with it.

Sighing to herself, she plopped into her chair and shot Greg a text, asking for his banking details to transfer the day's lunch expenditure to him. Sush didn't know whether to feel elated or exasperated when he replied, "Just buy me a coffee in about an hour. A big one."



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