

Chapter 32

Greg locked his phone after replying to her message, sighing to himself, wondering why she was suddenly shutting him out. He thought they were getting along well. Better than well, even. Why the sudden change of behavior? Where was the playful sass, the ease that was there whenever they were together? How did something like that get flush out overnight?

And honestly, why did he care?

In his defense, it would've been easier not to care if she didn't draw him in like a fucking magnet with everything she did: the way she talked, walked, ate, drank, puzzled over a task at hand. Goddess, especially the way she puzzled over a task at hand: the way her brows arched, the manner her body stilled, the way her eyes got lost into the page or on the screen. It was mind-consuming.

Letting Sush linger at the back of his mind, then diverting - or rather forcing - his concentration back to the Chief Archer showing him the room with their inventory labeled in a perfectly organized manner, he chose to refrain from asking whose idea it was to label things in bright colored markers since he recognized that handwriting from going through the octopuses records and notes.

Abbott possessed limited vocabulary during their walk down inventory aisles, answering questions with "yes", "no", "last week", "indeed", and "as authorized". For a moment, Greg began to wonder whether Abbott was just a puppet and the real Chief Archer was hidden among the rest.

"And the explosives? Where were they kept the last time hunters used them?" Greg questioned.

Finally, the emotion that was absent from Abbott's face embraced a

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flicker of surprise and some offense. "Never in the history of this humble profession has any explosives been stored, Your Grace."

Wow. Greg didn't know Abbott had that many words in his arsenal. Maybe he wasn't a puppet after all.

Abbott mistook Greg's surprise for disbelief and went on, "I'm certain you haven't come across any records of explosives in the octopuses' archives. If there are none there, there are none here. We don't bypass them. In fact, everything you see around you runs through them before they have a place on the shelves and on these floors."

Give this man a trophy because that was a lot of words, so many that it drew an impressed nod out of Greg. Taking another look around just to see if Abbott would fill the silence with more information, Greg came to terms that the chief probably maxed out his quota for the day and he began, "So how do you explain the Sakura Kondo case?"

"That case involved a death that was not connected to this profession, Your Grace."

"Was not connected, or was not supposed to be connected, Chief?" A pocket of silence followed before Greg continued, "Because the facts are uncanny: a twenty-five-year-old octopus, fresh out on the field for one year, and on one unfaithful night, she was simply lured out into a jungle and had explosives tied to her and - quoting the records - disappeared and presumed dead." He scoffed. "Funny how her remains were confirmed to be scattered at the murder site yet the records still leave her death as a presumption and not a fact."

"Procedures may have differed back then, Your Grace," Abbott said, speaking through gritted teeth.

"I'm sure it was. But that isn't the point, Chief." He stopped inspecting the rows of ammunition, turning to Abbott and said, "Are you certain you don't have the slightest suspicion that the hunters' system might

have been involved in that explosion?"

Abbott's throat bobbed. Still, he managed a straight face when he replied, "I am in no position to speak for those who came before me, Your Grace. But I can say there has never been evidence linking them to Kondo's death."

"I know. There's no evidence linking anything or anyone to her death. No jealous exes, no beneficiaries, no enemies. It wouldn't seem strange if it wasn't so... clean," Greg mused.

They took another few steps before Abbott braved himself to ask his first question, "If I may, Your Grace, what is the significance of the Kondo case?"

Greg's gaze pivoted to him, judgment for Abbott's indifference on full display. "After the six deaths in the east, you don't think this is something to be concerned about, Chief?"

"I thought the attack in the east involved zahar and a knife."

"Systems change. Methods can change, too. A different modus operandi doesn't equate to a different culprit."

"You're certain they're the same party? From the Kondo murder?"

"I'm not certain of anything. Evidence is limited. Hypotheses vary with each variable. And this... must be the poison chamber." They came to the very end of the room, at a door painted black with a white sign that had the red words "CAUTION" nailed to the door.

As Greg flung it open, Abbott made it a point to note, "Like everything out here, everything in there has passed the octopuses' assessments before sitting on those shelves."

"I don't doubt it," Greg murmured, gingerly running his fingers over the black and white labels that were in a different handwriting, one he'd been seeing a lot in recent days as well, one that had a different effect

on him than the colorful ones outside. The ones in here were a work of art, the way each curlicue swayed, curled and twisted offered a peek into the writer's soul, a glimpse into her personality. And he found himself melting, smiling.

It was Abbott's throat-clearing and voice that pulled Greg out of his thoughts, pulling his lips back into a straight line as the Chief Archer asserted, "We don't store zahar in our inventories, Your Grace. Not here in the west nor in the east. The culprit who used it couldn't have gotten it from us."

Greg mm-ed, then asked when Monica Upshaw was due to return, which Abbott sheepishly admitted that even he didn't have that information. Deciding that he'd seen enough, Greg thanked the chief for his time and left.

In the elevator on the way down to the trenches, he linked someone from his network: Nash Beaufort, the rogue he'd asked to take over Ruby Lyworth's poison-production factory after throwing Lyworth into prison for treason and - off the record - for crossing him personally.

"Your Grace, how can I be of assistance?"

"Has anyone bought zahar from you in the past... I don't know. How long does zahar last?"

"Two years. Five, if left unopened."

"Noted. Have there been purchases?"

"Yes. They're an affordable form of pest control among our kind so it's a product that sells on its own. Should I curate the list of purchasers and send them over?"

"Yes. Any human buyers?"

"Not that I recall. I'll look through them again and let you know."

"Looking forward to it."

'Pleasure to serve, Your Grace.'

His eyes cleared when the metal doors opened and he made a beeline to his desk, huffing an exhausted exhale until he saw a large to-go cup that pushed the corners of his lips upward. He looked across the space, finding her at her computer, hand pressing her pink headband like she was trying to fuse it into her head, dark eyes focused on the screen, tipping the edge of his lips even higher. Beautiful.

He sank into the chair, and that was when he noticed the same calligraphic strokes he'd seen in the poison chamber, which read, "Just so you know: you don't have to keep buying me lunch."

He frowned, wondering if he was making her uncomfortable.

He liked buying her lunch. It gave him an excuse to talk to her and learn about the things she liked. He made a mental note to ask her about this later, not wanting to stop immediately. He'd be back in the kingdom the next day, so the talk could be postponed to the following work week.

The coffee was still warm and the first bitter sip tasted better than it normally did. He savored each drop, hoping that this cup wouldn't be his last from her.



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