

The Indomitable Huntress & the Hardened Duke - by Stina's Pen

Chapter 5

Four months later, Greg found himself in an elevator headed for the sixteenth floor alongside his cousins and the queen, along with the ministers and a few warriors.

The metal doors parted and they trooped down the well-lit corridor with glass-walled meeting rooms on each side, indifferent to those peering at them. Only the room at the end had opaque walls and doors, bookended by a guard on each side. At the sight of the neighboring species, the guards instinctively blocked the entrance doors, forbidding entry.

It was their presence which told Lucy where to go. She knew who they guarded anyway. "Lowell. Harlow. Is Valor in there?"

Lowell, blond with a diamond face, replied with crossed arms, "He's in a meeting, a matter of great urgency that just arose. You have been notified about the postponement of the treaty execution, I believe, Your Majesty."

Lucy's head tilted to the side as her lips lifted into a smirk. "We have a meeting with him. Now. It was scheduled last week and it's a matter of interspecies urgency. Unless his matter concerns the vampires - which I doubt it does - whatever that came up last minute at his end can wait."

"I'm afraid I'm not authorized to let you enter," Lowell responded with resistance.

"I didn't ask if you're authorized," Lucy said. "I'm *informing* you that I'm going in there and will have you thrown aside if need be."

By his side, Harlow - who had dark hair and a broader frame - pulled out his pistol and aimed at Lucy, which barely lasted a second when a stoned face Tobias Tristan, the Minister of Defense - who was right in front of Harlow - broke his pistol with one hand. The weapon shattered into pieces that scattered across the floor.

Xandar stepped forward, towering over Harlow, blocking his view of Lucy and reached for the front placket of the man's uniform, lifting him off the ground, making the guard do a one-eighty when his hands tried to get Xandar's hand to loosen as the human began apologizing and begging for mercy.

Onyx-eyed and inundated by homicidal rage, the king warned, "The next time you even think of disrespecting my wife, I will crush your limbs, tear out your balls, your dick,

make the smallest incision on your throat while I take out your rib one by one. In that order. Do you understand me?"

The guard nodded hastily as Lowell subconsciously stepped away from the door, his hand froze by his side, reluctant to draw out his own weapon from the holster.

The queen offered a meek, apologetic smile. "I'm sorry that your irresponsible coward of a boss put you and your colleague in the middle of this, Lowell. Thank you for your cooperation."

Lucy's small hand made the gentlest contact with her husband's bicep as she stood on her toes to peck a kiss on his jaw, whispering, "That's very sweet of you, darling. Please put him down. Gently. We don't want to be late."

Xandar mm-ed and lowered the man who - once his feet touched the tiled floor once more - sprinted out of the king's grip. Greg couldn't help the scoff that left his lips when the guy almost tripped while making his escape. Even Enora ran better.

The lycan warriors pushed the doors that opened into the room of officials, all of whom were hunters. A projection of a map flickered on the white wall.

"Out," Xandar ordered the room, then pointing at the beer-bellied man at the head of the table and stipulated, "Except you."

"Your Majesty," Commander Valor, the leader of hunters with salt and pepper hair, stood, stunned. "We're in the middle of a discussion about..."

"Oh, good." Lucy's perky voice bloomed before she strode to the front, eyed the presentation with an empty smile and said, "We're here for a discussion, too. And we're ready to start."

Chairs scraped against the floor as everyone hung their heads low and scurried out without being instructed. After the king pulled out a chair for his mate and she sat, he sank into the seat between her and Valor as the remaining lycan and werewolf ministers and warriors took their places in the still-warm seats.

Valor exhaled, frustration and reluctance hung in the expelled air, before he hollered, "Alagumalai, Patterson, Abbott." One woman and two men pivoted their gazes to him when their boss added, "Get your asses back in here." They strode back in without a word.

Greg, like everyone else, studied them as they took their seats opposite Xandar, Lucy and himself.

Hunters didn't necessarily choose their profession. They may be human but they are a class of their own. One could dream about being one of them, but if he didn't possess

the birthmark on his nape in one of the three categories of their kind, there was no way he'd qualify - let alone welcomed - to be a professional hunter.

There were one of three types a hunter could be born into: first, the archers - even though no hunter used bows and arrows nowadays - also known as the defenders, those who were said to be the best in combat and anything involving physical attacks or defenses; the second, the octopuses - the brains on strategy and tactics not solely in battles and wars, but also in mediating between species; the final group is the chameleons or - put simply - undercover agents, which was what Izabella was despite her once saying that she "loved not having to work whenever she visited lycan territory".

While the archers, octopuses and chameleons have a birthmark on their napes to signify the category they were destined for, the leader - when chosen by the majority - had his or her birthmark changed into a crown, which was the mark Valor had on his nape, one he wore with pride.

Unlike vampires with an exclusive skill, a hunter possessed skills across each category, though their proficiency in ones they weren't born with may be lower: they may be born octopuses, but that didn't mean they weren't good in combat. They were just generally less skilful than the archers.

The man furthest from Valor, seated directly opposite Greg, was Giovanni Patterson - a six-foot-two blonde with a defined jawline, thin lips and narrow frame. His muscles bulged from the baby blue short-sleeved shirt and his complementary blue eyes had already been stuck on Lucy the moment he was called back in.

He had recently been appointed Chief Chameleon when the former chief and deputy were found to have "accidentally" weaved themselves into the conspiracy with Delilah. Patterson had always been apt in getting what he wanted when he wanted. Ask him for advice and he'd tell you that looks would only get you so far. Or not far at all. What mattered was what came out of your mouth, your eyes and the tone which one used to persuade. Which was why he was so drawn to Lucy.

Unlike so many he had the displeasure of working with, the little gamma just got it. She knew how to act, and when and how to react. And when he said she knew how to act, she *really* knew how to act. Act calm, act happy, act amicable, act harmless - she had it all. It was no surprise to Patterson that she hooked the king. Sure, this chameleon would give her points for her beauty and the mate-bond but that wolf - well, now lycan - could talk, could present, could impress and could make people kneel, metaphorically when she was a gamma, literally now that she was queen.

They were very alike, Patterson thought. He could easily bend people to his will too. The trick was to be aware of the unaware and use these as the weak links to seek the prize.

On his second meeting with her in attendance as gamma many years ago, Patterson used his chameleon skills on Lucy - flattering and flirting with her, even saying that she "must" save an after-meeting coffee chat with him and maybe they could "do something more... enticing later tonight" - all to get her to go easier on them during the mediation.

Lucy offered almost no response, giving one-sentence answers. Patterson didn't think much of it, figuring she was playing hard to get. She did smile after all. Funny how he didn't see it was an empty smile. Little did he know he'd successfully pissed her off, though she didn't show it at that time. Her alpha brother was pissed too, and that should have been a sign, but Patterson didn't take it as an indication that things wouldn't go as he wanted. Overconfidence had been his downfall.

The repercussions of his actions came out when the mediation began and Lucy demanded the hunters trade more than the original bargain due to Patterson's "inappropriate mannerism and repugnant behavior to a partner species which insults not only me but my species as a whole".

Sure, Patterson had a tough few months after that as the octopuses constantly reminded him about how stupid he'd been, but being the sweet talker he was, he managed to get back into Valor's good books and climbed to the top of his kind while those know-it-alls remain exactly where they were - below him. Well, except for one know-it-all, the one seated two chairs away but eh... they were on equal standing now as far as hierarchy was concerned - him being Chief Chameleon and she - of all people - became Chief Octopus.

Forgetting about Chief Know-It-All, Patterson's blue eyes scanned the gamma-turned-queen from her head to those bare arms. Still smooth as ever. He'd bet they taste good, too. Her sleeveless maroon dress that accentuated her assets were really turni—

"Watch the way you look at her or you'd have trouble seeing for the next few days. Or weeks." The warning came in a whisper beside him. A whisper - though soft - carried a firm warning. Patterson didn't have to turn to know that it was the queen's best friend that was, annoyingly, always around.

"Chill, man," Patterson muttered, tearing his lustful gaze off Lucy and only stealing glances now and looking away when the king's murderous gaze scorched his eyes.

The hunter to his right was Axel Abbott - Chief Archer. He was a broad-framed six footer with short black hair that stood like small spikes, though his personality was anything but spiky. His arms remained crossed over a forest green shirt as he leaned back into his chair, but his shaking left leg under the table gave away his anxiety, one he hoped that only his colleagues could see but didn't know was a faint sound that every werewolf and lycan could hear.

The constant thud thud thud was already driving Greg insane, and his animal asked whether they could just rip off the hunter's leg already.

Axel Abbott had never been much of a talker as Lucy, Toby and their fellow gammas recalled. He just stood there like a loyal guard, nodding curtly or giving one-sentence responses when asked a question. Some even labeled him as being discriminatory when he shelled up with wolves but opened up with his fellow hunters and huntresses. Axel was careful with who he mingled with, never saying more than he thought was necessary. Do more, talk less was his motto. Fitting for an archer, as Valor always put it.

Finally, the only woman among the three who had to drag their asses back in was the leader of the octopuses - Sushmita Alagumalai. A six-footer with brown skin, dark brown eyes and square face, dark hair bunched into a low ponytail that reached her upper back, where the ends curled in all directions. A bright pink, worn-out headband sat on her head, tucking in the smaller curls that threatened to spring free. On her neck sat a gold chain necklace weighted by a locket of the same color.

About time, Lucy thought. She knew Sushmita from her days as gamma and always felt this huntress had the most sense. Sushmita fought for the benefit of hunters, but she was the only octopus who refrained from disregarding the interests of wolves during mediations. She'd been in the shadows for sometime when less worthy octopuses took the lead and snatched credit for her ideas, her solutions, her responses.

More than once, while Lucy was in a heated discussion with the Chief Octopus and he or she went speechless, feigning a look of contemplation with furrowed brows, she'd seen Sushmita scribble something on her notepad before pushing it to her superior, who'd then glance over it and replied in accordance to the contents on the note. More than once, the chief read the scribbles without understanding what it meant, which would be when Lucy and her fellow gammas turned their attention to the actual person she was debating with as the gamma of gammas asked, "What?"

Sushmita would try to hide a smile - secretly taunting her own head of division - and she'd continue the discussion on behalf of her superior from there, only stopping when she didn't have authority to decide for their side, reluctantly turning to her leader for the okay.

Toby used to say Sushmita was the only brain the hunters had and joked that if they were to abduct her, it'd crumble the hunters' operations overnight. It was an exaggeration, of course, but he and Lucy would begin fantasizing about plucking Sushmita out - just temporarily - whenever they wanted an easy win against the hunters. There were times they were mad at Sushmita for her rebuttals and propositions but - more often than not - they could live with the middle ground she'd eventually reach with the wolves.

Greg's eyes trailed from Sushmita's unruly curls to the over-conspicuous pink headband, taking note of the way she leaned forward just slightly, her arms folded inwards at her elbows that were anchored on the table. Her eyes were a dark wall,

giving away nothing. And unlike her archer colleague, her leg was definitely not fidgeting. Thank goddess.

Sushmita was studying him as well, knowing that the duke was the main reason for this meeting that the king and queen fought tooth and nail for. Taking in his partially onyx eyes on his sharp face and pitch black hair, a concave nose above the full set of lips - a look that broke hearts, she wondered if he'd broken that many hearts to deserve this one hell of a heartbreak.

Sushmita had seen him only once when he came to surprise Izabella with a visit. The Chief Octopus and many others had a hard time guessing what Izabella had accomplished to deserve the undivided attention of such a powerful figure that was known to be closed-off and practically allergic to commitment.

Izabella was not a hustler. She'd do the bare minimum and sweet talk her way through the rest of the task. Nobility was an intangible idea that she fancied, not a trait that she possessed. And whether that now dead chameleon was smart was up for debate. It was an odd fit with the duke but - as one of her colleagues chimed like a broken record - the mate bond triumphed over all logic. Many had been secretly happy that Izabella was killed because... well, not many liked her to begin with, especially not the octopuses, whom Izabella had little, if any, respect for.

In Izabella's defense, some octopuses called her a beauty with no brains, which was not objectively accurate. So her hatred towards their group could be seen as a justified response.

Sushmita felt neither happy nor sad when the news of the chameleon's death reached them, thinking that Valor would have to filter the rest of the chameleons. But the moment most of the former chiefs and deputy chiefs were found to be involved in the Delilah Conspiracy, thus were suspended with immediate effect, Sushmita was called up to handle all correspondence and public statements regarding the issue.

And she cursed. Day and night. And she didn't care when the rest of the hunters gave her disapproving looks. Half of them thought her outbursts was justified, so who fucking care what the other half thought?

Sushmita had never spent so many hours scrutinizing her own drafts and replies to emails that were signed by both Xandar and Lucy but which at least sixty percent sounded exactly like Lucy, who had an eye as sharp as an arrow and brain as crafty as a fox. The threats within those lines were new, so the huntress wagered that was the king's doing, and she was right. It was.

Sushmita normally thought Lucy was actually born a fox rather than a wolf and hated every fucking chameleon, archer and octopus that were involved in the fucking shit with Izabella that Sushmita now had to clean up. The huntress respected the gamma-turned-

queen but this woman really had to start contributing to the cost of coffee she had to down to stay more alert than usual these past four months.

She felt Greg's eyes sear into her skin and guessed that he'd been briefed about who had really been carrying this cluster fuck of an issue. Valor was just the one with the final say, who Sushmita had been constantly arguing with about solutions and corresponding consequences.

When Valor said he'd sent word to the lycans and werewolves that the meeting would be postponed and he used "an urgent matter" as an excuse, Sushmita blew up, telling him to be ready to watch his family slaughtered and his house burned to the ground and prepare himself when the lycans' and wolves' wrath spread until no hunter was safe. Needless to say, she was the least surprised when the lycans and wolves barged in.

But she was surprised that the guards outside remained alive and nothing and no one was burned to the ground. Yet. Maybe they'd burn something later, she thought.

The dark circles under her eyes didn't bother her. But what was coming next strained her, mentally and psychologically. She was on her second cup of coffee before noon and had only Izabella and her pals to blame for the predicament she was now ordered to defend. Defend fucking idiots. One of whom had the easy way out - death.

At times like these, Sushmita would wonder why she even became a huntress in the first place. Sigh.

But she knew exactly why she was here. There was only one reason holding her from leaving, and after seeing that through, she'd be out of the door and these bozos would deal with their own shitshow.