

# The Indomitable Huntress & the Hardened Duke Novel

## Chapter 24

At lunch, Hazel asked Sush about why she had to get Greg bagels and coffee. Sush lied eloquently on the spot, saying that she lost a bet against the duke about his age, to which Hazel reprimanded, "How could you not know that? Everyone knows it's a hundred and ninety! Five years older than the king! Last I checked, you're thirty-five, so aren't you supposed to have the memory of a thirty-five-year-old?"

"Unlike you, my brain cells are limited and I have to be selective about what I store in them. His age seemed too trivial to warrant a space in my mental archive." The truth was she knew. Like Greg, she'd memorized his and the mavericks' profiles and faces before they showed up, down to the most trivial detail of their ages.

"So... he just happened to tell you he took coffee?" Suspicion crawled onto Hazel's face.

"Nope. He just said whoever lost the bet would buy the other bagels and coffee."

"You two sure are getting along," Hazel remarked, not even trying to hide her indignation.

Hoping that this wouldn't start a stir because Hazel really was one of the best brains and kindest hearts in the trenches, Sush said, "Well, the mavericks are getting along with some of our own. It'd be wrong for us not to do the same with their leader."

Hazel sighed, resigned, seeing Sush's point without much effort. "Why isn't he like that with me, though?" she questioned, getting lost in thought for a moment. Then her eyes snapped wide in horror when she whispered, "Is it because I look like Izabella? Is that why he's allergic to me? Wait, do I even look like Izabella?"

"Hazel," Sush took the tray, paid and led them to the lunch table. "Give yourself more credit. You look nothing like that bitch."

"Oh," Hazel heaved a relieved breath. "For a minute there I thought... but then why..." She dropped the conversation when they reached their spot.

Sush placed the tray containing a plate of bagels and a mug of steaming coffee in front of Greg before she plopping into the seat facing him and next to Hazel, who began dividing the pizza that she and Sush were going to share.

Greg took one glance at the deputy splitting the crust before his eyes flickered to the chief, giving her a slight shake of his head like he was disappointed she couldn't take care of such a simple task.

Sush's head angled a little to her right, a smug smile plastered her face, silently conveying, "I don't work for you."

His brows raised to acknowledge her defiance before his eyes glazed over, linking Jade and Ella to join him with specific instructions to keep Traffic Cone busy if she started talking, which he was positive would happen.

"So you're a coffee person, Your Grace?" Hazel began.

Oh, Goddess. He had already begun atoning for his sins years ago. Please spare him from this torment.

The Goddess must have heard him. Before he needed to articulate a response, an extra chirpy Ella appeared and slid in next to Greg, smiling radiantly, though inauthentically for those who really knew her and seen her smile before. "Hi, mind if Jade and I join you guys? Oh, I've been meaning to tell you this since yesterday, Hazel - you pull off that hair color really well. It really brings out your personality. Lights up the trenches in a way."

Ella genuinely liked the color on Hazel but hadn't brushed past the deputy to tell her yet. And she intentionally brought it up now despite knowing Greg didn't like it because he'd just made her work during lunch break when she'd normally spent time linking Toby. This was her small way of getting back at her boss, which seemed to be working since she could hear his sharp exhale that spoke for his exasperation.

Hazel had just split the pizza and handed Sush her share when she met Ella's blue eyes smiling at her, which was contagious, and the deputy's lips curled up. "You really think so? Thank you. I like to switch things up and keep people on their toes." Eyes shifting to Jade, she offered a bright smile.

Jade didn't even know why he was there, and merely lifted his chin and uttered a brief, "Sup." He then sank next to Ella, hoping she'd be able to do most of the talking. He was in tech for a reason - he didn't like being on the field where he'd have to smile and pretend. He could do it. But he hated it. It wasted so much energy that could be used to actually build something: a code, an algorithm, a freaking system! It was beyond him why he was asked to join them.

As Ella listened attentively to Hazel telling her about how being a huntress was her calling, Greg's eyes that were darting to the chief more often than usual did not escape Ella, nor were their eye signals, which persisted even when he was biting into the bagel. It looked as if her boss and the chief were having a conversation without saying anything.

She knew the look well and a modicum of worry for Greg set in her stomach. The last thing they needed was Izabella 2.0.

When the crowd dispersed at the end of lunch hour, Ella linked Toby, telling him she'd be working late, wanting to do an extensive background digging through the physical and digital archives in the trenches with Jade and a few others on the Chief Octopus, expressing

her concern that Greg may be treading into dangerous waters without knowing again. Her normally-supportive husband's response was, 'Right. Right. That makes sense. Babe, remind me: bosses and employees - who's supposed to take care of who again?'



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