

Chapter 26

In the dark room of Sush's apartment, the red strips displaying the time on her bedside alarm clock showed 3:16 AM when the sound of her ringtone blared through the room, jostling her awake. Phones were never turned off in this profession, especially not if they were chiefs or deputies. They were paid at a laughable wage to work at fixed hours and be reachable at all hours.

Swiping to answer the call without checking the caller identification, she hid under the covers with her eyes closed while the caller spoke.

A security breach. In the east. EAST.

She didn't choose to stay in the west because she'd enjoy taking a hell of a long flight to the other side of the globe, especially not when it was still dark, her bed still warm and her eyelids still heavy. She tried wriggling her way out of the assignment, saying that she'd send Hazel and two more octopuses, but when the representative from the east said Valor ordered her and Abbott to be there, she checked her messages and - for longer than a brief moment - considered deleting the commander's message and claimed she received no such instruction.

Dragging her exhausted bones out of bed and getting some shuteye in the Uber on the way to the airport, Sushmita dropped Hazel a text saying that she'd have to take charge until she'd settled things in the east. The two octopuses she asked for were already there - one groggy and the other awake. Wide awake. She wished she had that level of energy, not minding the dark circles beneath those alert eyes. When Abbott joined them, they alighted the plane.

During take-off, they sat facing each other, flipping open their laptops to

view the documents and pictures in the files they downloaded beforehand as Sush began scrutinizing the reason she pulled her ass out of bed and quickly concluded that - for once - this was a justified emergency.

How the hell did something like this happen?

"What the..." The hunter seated next to her murmured under his breath, then - instead of enlarging the picture using the plus icon accessibly placed at the bottom right corner - he brought the screen closer to his face like he was pouring the light into his eyes. Sush wondered if that was what he did to look awake.

The huntress seated opposite her was as sleepy as she was until her green eyes bulged at the first picture, enlarging it with the touchpad, too stunned to consider lifting her laptop like her colleague.

Abbott wasn't doing any better, face paling in dismay before closing his eyes to convey a silent prayer.

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In the evening when the golden light shared the sky with an array of colors before the purple and blue gradually submerged the radiant palette, Kenji Suzuki, the representative from the east who called, met them outside the taped perimeter. Greeting his colleagues from the west with formal handshakes but said hi to Sushmita with a hug that even shocked the Chief Octopus herself, he whispered, "It's good to see you again, Sush."

Sush promptly pushed him away, using just the right amount of force so it didn't look like any drama was about to unfold.

Kenji smiled broadly and was about to say something when an impatient, grim rumble came from behind the westerners. "If you invited us for small talk, I suggest a video call. Otherwise, make yourself useful and lead us to the crime scene."

All eyes fell on Greg, an impassive Ella and Jade right behind him. A heated sensation crawled up his chest, painting a deathliness in his eyes when Kenji held Sush. Greg's bodily instincts brought him to her side, the space between them narrower than one would expect. Despite his lethal energy, Sush remained unafraid. Wary, maybe. But not afraid.

Sush was one who'd normally prized personal space, but - at this time - she didn't even think to move as her sleepy brain computed how Greg knew about this emergency.

Kenji's friendliness wavered as apprehensiveness grew. He skimmed the duke and offered a curt nod, acknowledging, "Your Grace. This is a surprise."

"How so?"

Keeping the fidgeting leg to himself, Kenji said, "Well, for one, I only called my colleagues. I didn't make any calls to the mavericks."

"How very heartbreaking," Greg replied monotonously with crossed arms.

On a normal day, Sush would've found that funny. But given the circumstances they were in, she decided this wasn't the best time to laugh, thus ending up thinning her lips to suppress a smile. She'd normally have no issues keeping a straight face but the lack of sleep must be getting to her control centers.

Kenji's eyes found their way to her and she harrumphed before replying, "It's in the treaty, Kenji. His Grace has full access to the ins and outs of our systems, including sudden breaches like the one here. How about we reduce the likelihood of the duke flying off the handle by heading to the crime scene?"

Skipping over the fact that Greg had already flown off the handle, Kenji muttered, "Sure." Perhaps there were other handles that would fly off. Kenji took another sideways glance at Greg, having so many questions

for Sush about the duke but knew these were questions for another day.

The police and archers let them through the black and yellow tape. They stood on a plain field with a thick forest up ahead. The innocuous site was misleading enough to overlook the fact that it was the most heavily monitored part of the east where the octopus's eastern lair was right underneath. Today, thanks to the tape, the field that could have passed up as a manicured lawn seemed like a cleaned up murder site, which it was. Blood stench the air, despite its faded odor, leading Greg and the mavericks right where six archers were killed.

Just like the reports said: the deceased archers surrounded their assailant before dropping like flies. Their blood now stained the grass in brown. The kill was swift. And odd.

One minute the archers surrounded a figure in a beanie whose face was fully covered save for a set of eyes. The archers bellowed in rage, demanding the intruder to stand down and raise both hands.

The intruder took a look around at the guns pointed neatly at him and an object fell from his hand. The object was later found to be the murder weapon - a knife.

An archer ordered the intruder to raise both hands and it was done slowly: the hands that hung on his sides, near his trouser pockets slid up, and when his hand reached the pocket, slid over the fabric, a sound of water from sprinklers made the archers look around, and - seconds later - they began screaming. The intruder picked up the knife and slashed each of their necks, making each one fall to the ground before he disappeared into the thick trees.

Several questions arose: who was the intruder, what was he after, who turned on the sprinklers, and what made the archers scream?