

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

## Chapter 1

### PRESENT DAY

The Duke of L'ouest, Greg Claw, remained pensive as his darkened eyes examined the pictures and screenshots for what was probably the twentieth time. The report his top hacker curated for him - behind his back - would normally warrant a praise, a raise, a pat on the back for the initiative taken, but this was one that changed everything he thought he knew, everything he thought he believed in the last three months, everything he thought he could have. Which was why he simply accepted the stack as the glow of his complexion dimmed, leaving Jade - his hacker - without a word.

The decision was supposed to be an easy one and Greg felt ashamed to admit that he hesitated and - for a brief moment - considered looking the other way, asking the subject why before doing anything rash. But he knew why. It was written in the evidence. Asking wouldn't just waste more time and make him vulnerable, it'd make everyone he knew vulnerable.

What changed his mind within microseconds? What made him just *know* that he had to do what he was going to do? Enora. Seeing his four-year-old little sweetheart in his mind was enough to steer him back onto the path which, he hoped, was the right one to embark on.

The way his little girl clung onto his pants and shirt, hid behind him, and refused to speak whenever the subject was around should have alerted Greg, but it didn't. And it made the duke feel even more idiotic that it didn't. It should have. He was Greg Claw. Something as glaring as the pup's aversion SHOULD have alerted him or - at the very least - made him suspicious. And Greg felt like he failed when he didn't even instinctively feel that something was wrong.

Greg developed doubts over time but these little thorns didn't grow on their own. It came about when his nieces and nephew - who normally took meeting strangers moderately well - didn't seem to take the subject well. At all. Hiding. Avoiding eye contact. Using potty breaks as an excuse to avoid having to answer the subject's questions. And the list went on.

Looking back at the way he tried so hard, believing that the trust was real made him feel used, naive. And he hated feeling naive. In other words, slow. Slow to catch on. This was an insult that he reserved only for the truly slow, and he knew karma was a bitch when he was handed this stack of papers printed in black and white, now in a neat bundle settled against his steering wheel.

The red sharpie - which was among Enora's things in his glove compartment - now rested in his hand as he flicked it over and over to kill time, re-reading the texts and decoding the messages again even though everything was already etched to his brain.

One of the screenshot messages read:

"Keep fucking him to keep him blind. We should be able to wrap this up in a couple of months. Then you're done."

"Relax. He's not as sharp as they say. It'll be a loooong time before he suspects a damn thing."

"He still thinks you're a porn star in bed?"

"The fact that you have to ask is insulting."

"Just checking. Do you...cum with him?"

"I have to. It's part of the job. Logan, we've been through this - I think of you to come."

"God, I'm getting a hard-on just by reading that."

The words burned Greg's eyes and he squeezed them shut.

Once they reopened, he steadily underlined "not as sharp" and "a loooong time" in red, as if to carve it to memory and let those words deliver a blow to his soul and leave its mark there, so that he'd never be this stupid or blind again.

Three months. He'd admit it really was "a loooong time".

What these people didn't know was that anyone who crossed him couldn't even hope to survive. It was one thing to toy with his reputation and skills, it was another to undermine his intelligence, and a completely separate ball game to play with his heart.

He checked the time on the dashboard. Two more minutes.

Greg closed his eyes once more and pressed the back of his head against the headrest, linking Alissa, 'In position?'

'Yes, Boss.' Greg appreciated Alissa filtered out the sympathy from her reply. He then checked in with Ivory and Desmond, who had been ready for a good ten minutes, just as he was.

Like the biological clock in Greg's body was in sync with the digital clock on the dashboard, his eyes opened the second the white number against the blue backdrop changed.

Peering out of the window, he hoped that he was wrong. He hoped that his hacker was wrong. He hoped that the evidence and this whole thing was an array of misunderstanding that would be brushed away as a well-executed prank.

But his people wouldn't do that to him and he knew in his bones this was happening. He started this mess and Greg Claw never created any messes he couldn't clean up. Advertently or inadvertently.

On cue, the five-foot-six brunette with curls covering half her back, fair skin and hourglass figure appeared from around the corner, just like the screenshots said she would. Her signature leather jacket that was two sizes too big covered the sunny yellow dress underneath with a crimson belt that matched her lips. Greg tried not to think of her lips or her eyes and focused on the blue velvet bag hanging loosely from her right shoulder.

When she came close to the scrum of parents, her razor-edged lips - one that his most hated cousin subtly cringe to in their encounters - curled into a smile. The way she nodded and mingled was as beautiful as it was fake. A show.

The duke's held breath was only broken when Hailey, the kindergarten teacher and one of his highest-skilled followers, linked, 'I don't care if you're going to kill me for asking this but honestly, Boss...Is this the only way? These are the pups we're risking! Among them - Enora.'

'I'm well aware.' Greg's voice was a deep, uncompromising baritone. 'If we play this right, everyone here would be none the wiser.'

'If she decides to deviate today, she'd still be here when the pups are released!'

'She won't deviate. The pups can be released. Everyone will be safe... Well, everyone except her.'

Hailey exhaled hard, her frustration and justified worry blasting through the link. 'At least tell the queen!'

'Already have.' Silence hummed, until Greg cleared his throat. 'Which is why, as I understand, the bloodsucking empress's consort is now in her invisible form, one step away from our target. And the empress herself is at the gate. Also invisible.'

'It's still risky,' Hailey adamantly argued.

'What we've been doing for years has been risky, Hailey. We will succeed in this just as we've succeeded in every other assignment prior to this mess. It will go smoothly. Because we - me, in particular - have a lot to lose if I screw up. I've screwed up enough in this lifetime. And I have had enough of losing.'

Ending the link in a brusquely imperious manner and stepping out of the car, Greg crossed the clear road and headed straight to the woman in her oversized leather jacket, bracing himself.

Her high-pitched laughter brought back great memories, all of which he now marked as lies. The thundercloud brewing inside him was controlled and calmed with the image of his niece in mind, giving back his eyes their original lilac shade, which he'd have to hold onto for at least another two minutes.

When he was five steps away, the parents that the subject was speaking to spotted him and made her aware of his presence.

Izabella Delilah turned, the same coy smile plastered across her face - a smile which Greg returned as she stepped forward and their lips touched. The familiar sparks traveled from their lips to his entire body, disorienting his animal especially when her tongue demanded entrance, which he allowed only briefly. Parting their mouths and smirking at her as naturally as he could, he murmured, "Hey, baby."

"My roguish duke," she whispered his pet name almost hungrily, invitingly, as she always did. Her hand crawled up his chest and rested on the side of his neck.

The corner of his lip tugged higher, which would have been a dead giveaway for creatures who actually paid attention, who actually knew him, which Izabella Delilah clearly didn't, despite being his bonded mate, whom he'd spent hundreds of hours with and slept with for more times that he'd like to admit.

*What a disappointment*, he thought. It was at this moment that he conveyed a silent thanks that they were not marked.

"Can I steal you away for a moment?" he asked in a gentlemanly but suggestive manner that had some of the listening ladies swooning.

Izabella's hand ran down his hard chest, stopping above his heart. "Would there be enough time? Aren't the pups coming out soon?"

Stepping closer, he muttered, "If we're quick, we could still make it."

She pursed her lips, feigning contemplation, then resigned with an alluring smile. As usual, she tugged him by his hand and led him around the corner from where she appeared earlier, then a second corner into the empty back alley.

The vandalized walls brought back such fond memories of him pushing her up against it as they made out like teenagers. The way their mouths devoured each other, the sounds that came out from their efforts. But they never took things too far, Greg being mindful about who might appear out of the blue.

When they reached this spot today, Izabella's hands found their place on his wrists, seductively moving up his arms like they always did when they were bound to begin. She brought herself nearer to the wall and pulled him in, expecting Greg's hands to go for her ass like before.

However, instead of going for her bum, one of his hands pinned her at her collarbones as his other hand extracted a syringe from his back pocket containing a serum, which he injected into her voice box. A move that she clearly didn't see coming, judging by those widened eyes.