

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

Chapter 9

The following week, Greg and thirty mavericks trooped into the hunters' headquarters.

Each type of hunter would have ten mavericks breathing down their necks in the coming months, who would rotate at month's end. Greg himself would turn up in any department at any time he deemed fit. Bless his cousin-in-law...fine, and cousin - for materializing this big-shot request he made.

The archers, chameleons and octopuses crammed in the welcome lounge to greet them. Valor's idea was to start with an introduction session "to break the ice".

A gust of frustrated exhale left Greg when he replied, "I break necks and limbs, sometimes ribs, but never ice." Taking one step closer, towering over Valor who swallowed and tried not to squirm, Greg declared, "I'm not here to make friends, Valor. My people and I have memorized every face, name and background of every hunter months before today. If you and your people have not conveyed the thirty-one names and faces here to memory, I'd recommend you step down. I don't appreciate being slowed down by inefficiency and incompetence."

The air turned cold. The rays penetrating through the glass became an illusion of warmth as the air-conditioner blasting arctic breeze offered a better version of reality. The only heat radiated from the duke, which ranged from anything between impatience and infuriation to downright murderous.

Valor cleared his throat. "Your Grace, we are simply extending common courtesy. We can always skip over the introductions if—"

"If we're not in the control rooms in the next minute, I'll be extending my version of common courtesy."

Several hunters jolted as Valor turned to his people and gave them a nod to disperse and lead the mavericks to the respective departments.

"Right this way, Your Grace," Sushmita's voice, cool and collected, echoed into his ears. Her hand gestured to the left when a ghost of a smile played on her lips. It wasn't a coy one like Izabella used to wear, nor a seductive one that he was used to getting from females who were either fishing for a duchess position or looking for a good fuck.

Sushmita's smile was one of amusement. And it wasn't for him, to be fair. It was for herself.

The upward curl may be mild but it was significant. Greg recalled seeing her when he came for Izabella, but Sushmita's face was as hard as granite at that time when she studied the papers in her hands, which he felt suited her. Oddly enough, this lighter smile suited her just as well.

She'd make a top notch chameleon. In other words, she was a Grade A danger.

As Sushmita and the other octopuses led them down the hallway, she couldn't resist replaying Greg's words to Valor. Finally, someone to call him out, someone who could safely do so without suffering any repercussions, someone who could make him yield. She began wondering whether it was a wolf/lycan gene to have a way with words because Greg's threat was epically phrased.

She wasn't surprised that he wanted to start with the octopuses. It was where she would've started. He'd sync all their data with his own - she assumed - new device. From there, he and the mavericks would look for suspicious patterns to sniff out possible moles and threats.

He'd probably move on to the chameleons next and Sushmita pictured him arguing with Patterson, who'd be forced to give in. Man, what she'd give to watch that unfold. That one was another hunter who needed a telling-off, though tearing off would work equally fine, she thought.

In the elevator that held five mavericks, Greg, Sushmita and two of her own, she tapped on LG 2 and waited as the metal structure brought them to a steady descent.

"Something funny?" Greg questioned, unamused. His partial onyx eyes fixated on her.

The two with her - an orange-haired huntress and bald hunter - stiffened. Were they going to die already? They knew they should have taken the elevator without the duke!

Even the mavericks got edgy, but Sushmita simply responded, "Oh, you have no idea, Your Grace. If you'd been here for as long as we have, you'd enjoy Valor's subtle squirming as much as I did." There was a pause as she considered her words, then added, "Actually, now that I think about it, the squirming wasn't subtle enough."

She chuckled briefly, unconcerned that no one joined her. The laugh was never for anyone but herself anyway.

Taken off guard by her directness and lack of hostility, Greg took a moment, then answered, "Blandishments will do you and your colleagues no favors, Alagumalai." This was the first time he said her name out loud and the way it rolled off his tongue was surprisingly smooth, like a blade sliding over thawed butter.

The metal doors opened and Sushmita was the first to step out, responding, "Then this is probably the first time in my life I feel blessed for not having that skill in my repertoire."

The trenches were made up of dark walls and cement floors, cubicles grouped according to departments, the brightest thing in the room being a partitioned section that sat right in the middle of the room. It had glass walls and white tables, and the kingdom's forces recognized - from the floor plans that they obtained through hacking - that it was the room where the octopuses ran tests on their equipment and devices.

Raising her voice, Sushmita instructed her people to turn on every computer and open the programs as instructed the previous day, then turned back to Greg and completed their conversation at her usual volume, "Just so we're clear, Your Grace, flattery is only available upstairs - on the seventh, eighth and ninth floor. You won't find a lot of it down here in our trenches. Anyway," the orange-head reappeared, the tablet in her hand handed to the chief as she took a closer look at the duke, scanning him from head to toe, which he ignored, his own eyes still pinned on the chief, who swiped through the device with knitted brows before handing it to Greg. "Valor said to 'guide' you, but after unintentionally and successfully flattering you for the day, I'd rather not push my luck and insult you by going through something you'd probably figure out on your own."

Dropping the tablet into his hand, she added, "Have fun. If you have complaints to file, I'll either be on this floor or one floor above. Valor would be on the tenth floor if not with the chameleons on the seventh, eighth and ninth."

Before Greg uttered a word in reply, her peripheral vision caught something behind him. Her brows drew deeper as displeasure took over. She strode past him and hollered, "I said THREE screens! Why are there only two? Great, now one. What are you two doing?"

There was something about the way she shouted, the way she fumed that turned heads. Well, Greg's head, at least. He wondered if she knew she'd unintentionally and successfully flattered him the second time in less than five minutes when she simply handed him the tablet without offering Valor's instructed guidance.

Guidance. Ha. Idiot.

Though clearly, the same could not be said about the head of the trenches.

Allowing himself a moment to watch Sushmita check the program while the two junior octopuses muttered frantic explanations, Greg then forcefully drew his attention to the device in hand, extracted his thumbnail and inserted into the port, copying the contents within seconds and syncing it to his and the mavericks' own devices.

He'd had Jade and a few others hack the hunters' files and systems before today, but they reported back that some required authentication mechanisms that they didn't have and couldn't create.

The mavericks browsed through the files and split up, scattering amongst the hunters.

Greg knew exactly where he wanted to start - with Human Resources, the most seemingly obscure part of the headquarters. He had every name, face and background. But he needed everything they had on file. Every award, hobby, unrelated degree qualification. Everything.

A screen was vacated for him and he took his time scrutinizing. The five octopuses in the department tried to ignore his daunting presence, yet it was undoubted that their work was slowed down and their breaths hitched whenever Greg moved just the slightest inch - be it to stretch his legs or lean back into his seat. It was unnerving. And they thought having Sushmita lingering around them was bad.

None of the octopuses knew nor noticed the duke's gaze subconsciously flickered to their chief every few minutes before he had to consciously tear his eyes away. There was something about her, something that drew him in and made him look. He didn't know what it was, though he was sure it wasn't just the pink headband.