

## The Indomitable Huntress And The Hardened Duke

18:10 

### Chapter 18

Sushmita made her way to the lunch lounge that was built exclusively for the chameleons while the octopuses and archers spent their lunch hour on a separate floor. The chameleons' lounge had posh furniture and high-tier lighting, floors that shone and air-conditioners that were all fully functional. Sushmita breezed past the food stations and chameleons queuing to form a millipede, heading straight to the VIP section where the salt and pepper hair of her boss came into view. Patterson was there, too. As expected.

The Chief Chameleon sat leaned back with one leg over the other, an arm casually resting on the empty chair next to him, chatting with Valor with the confident, easy smile that gave him such a big boost in climbing up the ranks.

Sushmita wasn't sure whether it was the pattering of her sneakers or her radiating annoyance that alerted Patterson's senses, who held onto his smile with more effort like weights had been attached on both ends of his lips when she barged over. His lips moved, saying something to Valor, making the commander's shoulders sag.

Valor blasted out a gust of frustration, murmuring under his breath when Sushmita appeared with her mouth scrunched into a scowl. Not bothering with a greeting or a smile, she began, “Monica Upshaw. When? Why? How much more of the same thing am I going to see?”

“Isn’t she an archer? As in, within Abbott’s jurisdiction?” Patterson’s irritating voice rang through the air.

Pivoting her glare at him, she replied, “Why, yes. Congratulations, Patterson. I must have mistook our boss for Abbott. Promotion looks great on you. Aren’t you a smart little boy now?”

Patterson’s throat convulsed with a choking swallow, feeling her tone putting him in a gradually-shrinking box. Attempting to mask the intimidation by putting on a victimized smile he’d long mastered, he said, “We’re all adults here, Sush. Let’s just calm down and discuss this.”

Taking one step toward the chameleon, Sush uttered, “What a mature suggestion from you. Funny how you can recite something like that yet not have the aptitude to tell when your presence and opinions are neither asked for nor required. Unless you have something useful to say, save your little chameleon tongue for an actual assignment.”

Turning to Valor, Sush continued, “I take it that you’ve been ignoring my messages and emails since this morning?”

Valor harrumphed and defended, “I was busy with th  
—”

“So it’s a yes. Since I can’t get you to face me any other way, we’re back to the four months of me hunting you down at lunch hour again.” She moved his empty bowl away, the broth inside almost flew out and Patterson jerked when he thought his new suit was going to be ruined.

She spread out the map before his eyes. “This damn thing had been revised and approved with Monica Upshaw’s name in Team E. What happened? Why doesn’t Abbott know anything either?”

Valor’s hard gaze told her to stand down and show more respect as he remarked, “I’m certain it’s because he knows when to ask questions and when to take orders as they are.”

“Unfortunately for you, I’m an octopus. Not asking questions is not my thing, especially after the Delilah fiasco that my people and I had to clean up. I swear, boss, if Upshaw is part of yet another ploy that’s going to explode in our faces...”

Valor’s fist hit the table, bringing the buzzing lounge

into dead silence. The sizzling from a pan at one of the stations resonated beautifully with the fuming Valor. Insolent woman, he thought. In a tone that left no room for argument, he spoke through clenched teeth, "We will discuss this after lunch. In my office."

The thing about Sush was that - for every tone that left no room for argument - she'd inevitably find a way to impale her argument into that very room.

Lowering her voice, her palms pressed on the edge of the table when she leaned in with eyes of flames that rivaled Valor's. "You had the whole morning to discuss this in your office. Either give me my answers now or I'll send her name to the defense ministry and let them decide if she should remain a hunter. I don't need to tell you what my recommendation would be."

A hunter in the next table choked on his potatoes and a few others bit the inner walls of their mouths, awaiting their boss's response.

As quickly as shards of shock intruded Valor's eyes, they left, leaving the anger that was simmering before. "Are you threatening me, Alagumalai?"

"I'm extending the courtesy of informing you about my next move if you choose not to cooperate, Valor. You may have liked the apprehensive feeling everytime we got an email from the kingdom, but I don't."

“Then maybe you’re not cut out for the job.”

Unaffected, Sush said sardonically, “Yes, a suitable replacement should be nominated and sworn in immediately, even though I’ve gotten eight out of ten votes from the defense ministry when I was elected chief. Wouldn’t recommending my dismissal now look good on you?”

Valor’s jaw clenched taut, forehead crimped. “Monica Upshaw’s case was ordered by a higher-up. You’d have to ask them if you’re fixated on answers.”

“Which department?”

“Defense.”

She tried not to look too exasperated but her tone failed before her face did. “I know. Which department of Defense? Do you have a name?”

“All I received was an email.”

“Forward it to me.”

“Mm.”

Straightening her back, her arms crossed as she waited.

Valor was dragging back his coffee that Patterson moved away when voices were raised but the shadow of the octopus blocking the sun from the windows continued blocking his peace of mind. His brows

knitted like he was asking what else she wanted, her right brow raised like she was asking what he was waiting for.

Muttering a grumble under his breath, he fished out his phone from his pocket and - in less than thirty seconds - forwarded her the email.

Sush remained rooted until she received it on her phone. Without a word of thanks, she turned, which was when Valor said, "Be careful where you step, Alagumalai. Hierarchy and power exist for a reason, and they stretch further than you may think."

Offering him the minimum amount of attention she could spare, she replied, "Enlightening. Thanks for the input, boss." Even with all that hierarchy and power, they still needed her to handle the Delilah et al. aftermath. Whatever the stretch of power was, it clearly didn't stretch far enough.

Marching out of the lounge that sounded more like a library, the chatters only regained their vigor when Sush disappeared into the elevator and returned to her trenches.