

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

Prologue

FOURTEEN YEARS AGO

"Over here, Sush," the old man said from the hospital bed, his voice hoarse and weak, the words came out in barely a whisper.

Seventeen-year-old Sushmita Alagumalai came home to find her uncle on the floor next to a broken mug, a pool coffee spilling over the floor. She screamed and the neighbors came over, calling the emergency helpline as she tried to wake her uncle.

An ambulance arrived and she was held back as the medical team checked his vitals - another heart attack, strapped him on a stretcher and hauled him into the ambulance, letting Sush sit with him and hold his hand. In a journey that seemed too long, all she could think of was, "Please, help him. Please make him wake up. I'll be good. I'll do anything. Don't let him go, too. Please."

She didn't know who or what she was praying to. She'd just lost her aunt two years ago, and she and her uncle had been grieving her death ever since. They were happy that they still had each other, until the first heart attack a year ago planted a seed of worry in her, a gnawing feeling grew as the the seed sprouted, like it was telling her the last person she had wasn't going to be there for much longer, and when she walked in on his fallen body, it was like her worst nightmare had come true.

At the hospital, once the ambulance doors flew open, everything that happened next was a blur. She didn't know how she got off, nor did she remember which corridors they passed through or whether she'd knocked into anyone. All she knew was that the operating room seemed too far away when it was - in fact - just right down the first hallway.

She stayed outside alone, sunk into one of the plastic chairs that were stained yellow from its original white, blind to her surroundings, deaf to the chatters, screaming and medical staff yelling orders. Her back was bent over, elbows on her knees, mouth to her interlaced fingers that had already turned cold. Her mind was blank and it only knew one word - please.

When the doors next to her cracked open, she shot up from her seat, eyes fixed on the two nurses and a doctor who emerged. The nurses went the other way, while the doctor met her gaze, a flash of sympathy marring his face. "He wants to see you," was all he said, holding the door open for her.

She sprinted in, wasting no time, halting only when the sight before her created a force from the ground that was so strong it threatened to bring her to her knees.

Her uncle pushed a reassuring smile, asking her to come closer. She drew strength from his voice, as she always did, battling against the pull of the ground and letting his eyes guide her. By the time she reached his side, her hands had to clench around the rail of the bed, no longer able to support herself. How could a man she once knew to be strong and invincible - one who fought for her and her aunt, one who taught her to fight for herself - now find himself in this state, unable to speak as loud as he used to and could hardly move?

“Sush,” he drew her prying eyes from the machines and blood back to him. His throat bobbed. “Your aunt has always been with us. And I will always be with you.”

She knew what that meant, and the tears of fear turned into ones of anger. Her mouth opened but before she could say anything, his hand raised ever so slightly as his forehead creased, knowing what she wanted to say but stopping the words right before they spilled out. “It won’t be easy,” he continued “But you will do well. Your aunt and I... have never done anything that surpassed our pride of raising you.”

Sushmita didn’t know how, but her hand found his, her thumb brushing across the back, feeling the wrinkles. His grip was still strong, and she let herself hope, hope that this was a phase, that he would get better, that everything would go back to normal, as much as his exhausted eyes were telling her he’d lost the will to fight.

He swallowed a lump in his throat, and she watched the wave the movement created in case she never got to see it again. “Your aunt... never wanted to tell you this, but I think you have a right to know. Your mother... She didn’t pass away from a road accident.”

Her eyes grew wide, a hunger for the truth now rivaled with the devastation of her uncle’s state. The old man went on for a few minutes, and when he’d told her everything, he said, “We had hoped it would surface one day - the truth, but maybe you’re the one who’s destined to hear it. And when you do, Sush, thread wisely, choose carefully. Choose peace. Choose happiness. Choose what’s best for yourself.”

The corner of his lips lifted as he gave her hand a firm squeeze for a moment before his eyelids fell, his grip lost strength and the beeping that Sush didn’t hear before was now a flat monotone.

As the medical team spilled in and ushered her toward the corner, an endless supply of tears trailed down her cheeks that no amount of tissues were able to absorb.

It was hours before the tears stopped, days before she fully processed the events of that day, and months before she accepted that she’d lost everyone she held close. Everytime she replayed her uncle’s last words, a fire blossomed in the middle of her chest, and one day she decided that what was best for herself was to get to the bottom

of things, to hunt down the ones who killed her mother, and she was going to make them suffer, down to the very last creature.