

Chapter Six

Stowaway

Fall break came and went, all too quickly as such respites from the demands of academia tended to do. Hunter noted that it had been well spent, as his two friends had ended up sleeping over two of the weekend nights when the three decided that it would be the best use of their time off.

Pancakes in the mornings, their choice of chicken broth ramen noodles in the afternoons, and too many sugary and salty snacks for them to count in the late nights binge watching cheesy scary movie films. Malissa had argued, at least, that the lengthy movie marathon would come in handy for her cinema class.

“I get to actually say that I’ve seen Alfred Hitchcock at this point.”

She had commented, after the three had finished watching, “The Birds” at around two in the morning that Sunday.

Hunter had felt satisfied, given the fact that Jack seemed to brighten up considerably at the chance to slack off even more than he usually did. Still, with Monday being their last day of the three had begrudgingly opened up their laptops to begin preparation for the week ahead as well as finishing up any assignments their less than generous professors had assigned them to complete during their break.

The fennec had managed to even take his mind off the distracting lure of infantile interests that seemed to be bubbling up inside him. He felt a little relieved that nothing out of the ordinary beyond wondering what it would feel like to wear a diaper again last Friday had happened over break.

They had even tried to crack open the crate containing the brooch once more, but to their chagrin it had remained stubbornly shut and unyielding. Jack had offered to work his magic with a screwdriver on the hinges, but both Malissa and Hunter had hastily told him that that would probably be a bad idea.

Today, it was another Thursday. As was wont of the many prestigious professors they were swamped with scholarly obligations up until the very end of Friday. Jack had insisted they have a wine night that evening, and knowing how poorly the weasel could hold his drink Hunter was working furtively to get his notes in order by the end of the week.

His history professor was droning on, a portly hedgehog who wore glasses so thick the lenses bulged out on either side of their frames. As always, Malissa appeared entranced by every word he stated while Hunter did his best to jote down whatever sense he could make of his meandering historical anecdotes.

Jack was already waiting in the library, sending entertaining messages to Hunter on his laptop at which he had to subdue a smile creeping onto his lips. Given the fact they were discussing a massacre that had occurred in the middle east at the moment, such an expression would have been grossly inappropriate. Still, the juxtaposition of the graveness of the matter compared to Jack's immaturity was more than enough to serve as a challenge to keep his face straight.

Hunter glanced at the clock for the fifth time in that lecture. Fifteen minutes remain, and he let out a quiet sigh of relief.

"At this point, our friends the Egyptians greatly waned in their power and thus had little influence on the politics in the fertile crescent..."

The hedgehog continued on, giving Malissa an appreciative nod whose eyes sparkled with fascination as she hung onto every word he said. Hunter appreciated the otter's love of world history, despite not being able to relate to it. Her knowledge of the rise and fall of civilizations and respective fursons gave her a sense of balance and groundedness he did not possess.

Not to mention the fact that whenever she talked about history, it was always much more interesting than when he heard it from anyone else; let alone a musty old textbook.

As the professor concluded his statement, his magnified eyes wandered over to the clock that hung above the doorframe of the lecture hall. He pursed his lips, stopping his speech as he was visibly considering what to do next. He spoke, his voice quavering as it tended to do while Hunter's ears perked up.

"Alright, I think we should call it at that. The progression of the next lineage of rulers would take up another half hour anyway. Class dismissed."

A whole ten minutes early, wow.

Malissa, who looked just a little disappointed, joined Hunter in gathering up her possessions and waited for him as he put on his coat.

"We should totally prank Jack."

She said wryly, addressing the fact that he would not be expecting them for another fifteen minutes at least.

"Sure, haha. Shutting a textbook loudly behind his head maybe?"

Hunter suggested, feeling a bit more mischievous than usual as Jack had been pestering him on messenger for the entire lecture.

"Oh, you're *devious*."

Malissa responded, barking out a sharp laugh as the two made their way towards the library. Within a few minutes, they had spotted Jack who was completely entranced by whatever was displayed on his laptop screen. Malissa grabbed a hefty book off of a bookshelf a few aisle over, leaning back studiously and peering at its cover with a mock expression of poshness. Whispering, she read aloud.

"A Complete Guide to Raising Litters, Kittens, and Lone Kits."

Hunter blushed. It had come completely out of the blue, sure it had just been a coincidence that Malissa happened to grab a book on the topic of raising littluns but still, it had caught him off guard.

“Uhh, you alright? You’re bright red.”

“Yeah, fine. Let me do the honors?”

Recovering quickly, Hunter nodded towards the book and was rewarded with a smile and the hefty volume. On the tips of his paw pads, Hunter snuck up behind Jack and opened the book. One of the pages rustled as he did so, and he pursed his lip. Jack, whose earbuds were in, did not seem to notice.

With a rush of hair that collided with the back of the weasel’s headfur, Hunter slammed the book shut inches from the back of his head.

“EE-YAH!”

Jack exclaimed, louder than Hunter had expected and elicited several dirty looks from students around him. Hunter grinned sheepishly, Malissa hiding in an adjacent aisle stuck her tongue out at him making it clear that she was intentionally hiding from the blame.

“Do you mind?”

Jack said, turning around to look incredulously back at Hunter who was currently glancing around to see if any librarians or prefects had heard the disturbance.

“Oh, not at all.”

Hunter responded, not looking at Jack before making sure the coast was clear. A few disgruntled students aside, the prank had been executed flawlessly. Jack massaged the back of his neck, appearing more shaken than he should have.

“What, we get you that badly?”

Malissa chortled as she took a seat at the table, Hunter shortly following her example.

“I’m looking at my grades man, not fun. I was already on edge when you pulled that trick on me.”

Jack shook his head, rolling his eyes before giving in and smiling ruefully at Hunter before saying.

“Who gave you that idea anyway? That was brilliant.”

“Oh, it’s all Malissa’s fault.”

Hunter stuck his tongue out at the otter, who put on an innocent expression and raised a paw to her chest in mock offense.

“Me? I’d never!”

She grinned, opening up her bookbag and taking her laptop out. As Hunter moved to do the same, Jack’s attention had already returned to the screen in front of him. Sounding distracted, he turned his head slightly towards Hunter without taking his eyes off of the monitor and asked.

“Hey, can I see your Calc notes for today? I really need to get cracking.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Hunter replied, reaching into his bookbag once more. His paw pads felt something furry. He stopped, tensing for a moment as he rifled around the insides of the bag once more. Something furry and squishy.

Perplexed, he hoisted his book bag onto the table and fully unzipped it revealing the mysterious object inside. Immediately, he wished he had not.

Sitting nestled between his notes and textbooks, was a beige teddy bear. Not only did this stuffie look like something out of a little kit's crib, but in its muzzle was a miniature pacifier and a name embroidered on its left breast.

"Buddy-kins."

"What. Is that?"

Jack said flatly, his paws hovering in mid air over his keyboard as he stared at the plushie now on full display on the table.

"I don... I don't know."

Hunter stuttered out, genuinely dumbfounded as to how the toy had managed to get its way into his bag.

"Buddy-kins?"

Jack read, his voice rising in pitch as an expression of hearty amusement began to build up on his muzzle. Malissa looked as confused as Hunter felt.

"Is he your comfort stuffie or something?"

Malissa asked, not appearing as entertained as Jack as her brown eyes looked into Hunter's blue ones. Hunter shook his head, his muzzle half open as he picked the stuffed animal out of his bag and set it on the table.

This was another mistake, as with the entire plush in view he now saw that around its waist appeared to be a plastic diaper. He felt his heart sink as he realized it was the same brand as the ones he had been caught staring at in the drug store last week.

"Dude, do you have baby fever or something?"

Jack was now staring at the stuffie in wonder, his eyebrows furrowed as he attempted to comprehend what he was looking at. Hunter felt a sense of panic welling up, his chest tightening as he scrambled for an explanation. One came to him, and he quickly calmed himself down.

"I think I should take it to the lost and found."

"Whaddya mean? He's yours isn't he?"

Jack now appeared completely flabbergasted. Hunter shook his head, his muzzle half open as he leaned into the genuine feeling of surprise he had felt upon discovering the infantilized teddy bear.

"No man, it's not mine. I... How did this end up in my bookbag?"

"You put it there dude."

Jack remarked flatly. Hunter shook his head again, standing up his tail swishing in agitation as he picked up the stuffie.

"Nah man, this is somebody else's and they might be looking for him."

Jack threw his paws up into the air in exasperation.

"Dude I don't care that much that you have an emotional support stuffie but you don't have to lie to us. It's okay!"

Hunter stopped, a pained grin spreading across his muzzle as he shook his head once more.

"Uhhh, really. Not mine."

Grasping the stuffie in one paw, he moved towards the staircase and descended down before heading to the front desk. The library, a giraffe who always appeared to be looking at whoever she was speaking to a little suspiciously, looked over the rims of her spectacles as she accepted the stuffie between two fingers.

"I'll see to it then."

She said shortly, standing up before striding over to a bin where she gently deposited it.

Now to face the music upstairs...

Hunter thought to himself, stopping by the water fountain for a drink as he did his best to compose himself for the barrage of questions he was sure his two friends would undoubtedly have in store for him.