

Chapter Seven

Discovery

The semester wore on, and with the progression of time came the increasing difficulty of the subject matter that Hunter's classes were covering. None of them even compared to the mounting complexity that his Calculus class was delving into, and the fox was beginning to wonder if he would be able to keep his head above water.

After the teddy bear incident, Hunter had gone home to his apartment that night wondering whether he was having a stress break.

It just... Doesn't make sense...

He had sat down in front of his laptop to write a report, but had simply stared blankly at the word document for how long he was unsure. The crayon was one thing, that could be written off as a genuine if not comedic accident. But the growing affinity to watch little kid cartoons, the sudden curiosity towards diapers of all things, and now a stuffed animal dressed as a baby?

Hunter had taken in a shaky breath, his sense of panic bubbling up inside of him as his mind raced to figure out what was going on.

There's a pattern... There has to be a pattern.

Hunter stood up and began to pace the length of his bedroom, his head lowered as he studied the floor with each pass. He knew he would have looked crazy if anyone was there to witness what he was doing. At this point, he was beyond caring.

His first suspect was Jack messing with him, the infantilized stuffed animal being planted in his backpack reeked of the weasel's sense of humor.

But that's just not possible...

He had not seen Jack all day, and he had snuck up behind him to boot. There was simply no possibility where he would have been distracted long enough for his friend to have snuck an item in. That, and Jack would have ended up telling him that he was the culprit behind the prank only to see Hunter's face of disbelief. No, it was not him.

Then who... What... How!?

Hunter began to mumble to himself, the stress of the ordeals mounting as his fatigue from the week's classes vanished with the clarity and intensity of switching to problem-solving mode.

"What's different... What's different... What's..."

Hunter stopped.

Slowly, he turned around to face the door to his bedroom.

With deliberate steps, he strode the length of his bedroom in two strides and opened the door with shaking paws.

Through the hallway, into the living, and there it was where he and his friends had left it. The box.

Hunter's nostrils flared as he breathed deeply, sensing his heartbeat in his chest as he shuffled awkwardly towards the box. A test, he had a test in mind. He would know something was sorely amiss if he could do what he could otherwise not do when others were around.

Hunter hooked a claw under the lid of the box, and with a deft motion opened with relative ease. The lid opened on silent hinges, revealing its contents to him just as he had left it.

The brooch sat, nestled in its lush blanket of purple staring up at him. Hunter reached forward, sensing the mysterious warmth radiating off of it even before his paw

pads connected with the opal encrusted jewel. The crack in its central most opal was still there, as he had expected, but its colors appeared to have shifted. Illuminated only by the overhead light in the center of the room, with no sunlight bringing out the dazzling array of colors its hues appeared to be more subdued.

That was how it appeared, until Hunter peered closely at the blemish on the large opal. He thought he had seen something moving, and its shape vaguely resembled that of a face. Hunter would have sworn that he saw an eye blinking up at him lost in the folds of rainbow colored crystal.

"Shit."

Hunter swore, his mind bringing him back to the origin of the brooch. It had likely belonged to ancient nobility, an artifact as priceless as it was ancient and it was messing with him.

The fox knew it was crazy, knew how outlandish it would sound if he tried to explain it to anybody, but he also knew that it was true. Something told him that these strange occurrences in the past few weeks had been due to the influence of the brooch he held in his paw right now.

With that knowledge, however, there came no relief of understanding as another, even bigger conundrum presented itself. He was somehow cursed, sure, but with what? What was the brooch doing to him and why? How?

Questions swam in the fox's mind even as his gut clenched. Suddenly feeling sick, he dropped the brooch back into its box and rushed into the bathroom. He felt ill, the realization that there were mystical forces outside of the realm of modern society's understanding and the fact that he was at the center of one such force was too much.

He felt helpless, angry even that he was stuck with this wretched affliction with nothing and no one to help him.

If he tried to do anything about it that involved other people he would end up in front of a mental health specialist. Not an institution, not at his age or intelligence anyway he would not allow for that, but he would certainly become a dossier for the school counselor to add to her already mounting pile of overworked students.

The only furson that might have believed him, let alone help him, had disappeared under mysterious circumstances.

Leaving me this joy of a museum display piece...

Hunter thought grimly, his grip on the situation returning somewhat with the advent of his sense of sarcasm. He wiped his muzzle with a paw, letting out a disgusted groan as the stench of his late dinner wafted up from the toilet bowl. He promptly flushed, rinsing his paws and then lathering them in soap for good measure before gargling mouthwash. Twice.

"Alright..."

He said aloud, letting out a breathy sigh as he stared at himself in the mirror. He had a plan, or at least the beginnings of one. If he was going to be on his own for this he was going to address it in the most logical way possible.

Research was essential, and given the fact that he had access to a university's worth of archives containing historical data he would have a good start.

Hunter glanced down at the sink where his right paw leaned on it. He laughed once, ruefully, still talking to himself even though he knew it was the beginning of crazy. Whatever, it was calming him down.

"Heh... Guess I'm going to learn about your trade after all, Auntie Tare."

Hunter clenched his jaw, looking up at the mirror resolutely before narrowing his eyes.

He had a plan. He would find out what exactly he was dealing with and how to stop it. Hunter hoped, at least.

Deciding that mulling it over would not do him any good, Hunter returned to his room and shut down his laptop.

Then he thought better of it, realizing that if he spent the night mulling over the fact that magic, actual magic, existed in the universe he would actually end up coo-coo for cocoa puffs.

Opening up a new tab, he decided that leaning into his unproductivity would probably be best accomplished with internet humor. An ad caught his attention displaying a stuffed animal, a feral red panda that appeared just the right size for him to hug.

Well, makes sense given all the stuffed animal talk my phone picked up today... At least that's normal.

Hunter did not feel confident in his conviction, as thoughts of the brooch's spell continued to creep through the back of his mind even as he fell into a fitful sleep that night.



Hunter's thoughts were still brimming with questions as he got up early the next day and went straight for the library. He had sat down at a table, taken out his notebook, and written out every event that had happened that had felt out of the ordinary.

Hesitating for a moment as he looked down at the blank page, he decided to go the simplest route and simply make a bullet list of the instances.

Timeline Anomalies:

- Acquire strange brooch
- Mysterious disappearance of aunt
- Sudden fixation with kid's cartoons
- Odd dream about sleeping in a crib like a baby
- Pencil suddenly becoming a crayon along with test changing to being answered in crayon
- weird feelings about diapers
- Baby stuffed animal appearing in backpack

Hunter stared at his list, noting one overarching similarity between all of them.

They're all... Just things that kids do... Wait a minute...

He scratched at his paper, his eyes lighting up as he realized that he had forgotten one instance that he had actually written off as a fluke.

- unexpected bathroom emergency during class

He had almost wet himself, he *had* wet himself a little bit in his boxers but not enough for anyone other than him to have noticed. He began to write dates of all the occurrences, or at least his relative estimation of them. All of the occurrences appeared to be roughly one week apart, but they had also gotten gradually weirder and more noticeable not only to him but other people.

He had even shared one of them, the kid's cartoons, although that was not that strange to begin with. Nostalgia ran amok on a college campus, but nevertheless he knew which one of the occurrences was causing him the most confusion.

Diapers...

It was embarrassing, but it was the only thing that he could not fully deny that he wanted to resist. On paper, by definition, due to public appearances he did not want to have something like that known.

But still...

The more he thought about it, the more hugging a stuffed animal almost as big as him while wearing a diaper seemed to appeal to him. There seemed to be an ethereal bliss to it, something other-worldly that drew him into a state of euphoria he could not fully articulate to himself.

The helplessness, the dependence, the safety that came with such a disposition. Not being able to get out of his crib, stuck only to idly hug his plushies and chew on whatever was available to entertain his muzzle.

The prospect of not being able to do anything about needing to go, letting go into his diaper and feeling the warmth spread. Then the aftermath of having to stay in a soiled diaper until somebody decided to change him.

Hunter realized he was staring blankly at his notebook. It had happened to him again, without realizing it he had sunken into daydreams that had been plaguing him for weeks now. A word bubbled up to the surface of his brain.

Safe space.

It was. Whenever he was stressed out because of school or unsure of a problem, the allure of blissful ignorance and dependency lulled him into a stupor that his friends had begun to notice as well. It was not hard to get himself out of, but it was tricky to avoid. The waft of babyish fantasies caught him when he least expected it, and with incredible effectiveness.

It's a good thing I don't have my car in the city if I'm this spacey.

Hunter sighed, closing his notebook and getting up from the table. Now the real work began, scouring the rows of computer terminals for an empty station that he could call his for the morning.

It's time to do some Egyptology research.