

Chapter Eleven

Study Room

Hunter woke up the next morning feeling as if he had never gone to sleep in the first place. After he had turned off his television and slunk his way into his bedroom, his thoughts had been obsessively revising the letter that he had read from his late aunt. The fennec realized now that his aunt being alive and somehow making her way towards him might be the only hope of getting any answers to his current predicament.

But would she? Seeing how she had been an almost non-existent presence in his life, would he be a priority of hers at all? Sure, he had an artifact that she would very likely want to reacquire if she got out of whatever situation she was currently in, but that was still assuming that she was alive and able to escape.

Hunter's rumination drifted to what his life might be in the future if he was unable to find any kind of solution. His feelings were still mixed about the clear diaper obsession he was starting to develop. Given his experience with the locked pullup he was rather surprised just how comfortable it had felt. That sense of comfort, however, was very much offset by his sense of anxiety at being discovered.

That seemed to be his chief concern, despite his inner feelings on the subject matter being somewhat mixed he was very much sure that discovery of his problem was not something he would want.

Strangers were one thing, he had no idea who that furson in the bathroom had been. Even though they were on the same campus, finding her again was pretty unlikely. He had never seen her in any of his classes, and assumed that she was an upperclassman.

But Jack? Malissa? He could already imagine their reactions. Malissa would of course be somewhat understanding, kind as she was. Jack would probably have a field day with the comedic material he could come up with, and be constantly shushed by Malissa.

Forced sympathy and pity would be the only products he would receive from his friends, if even they were capable of figuring out how to support him in such a strange predicament. They would think he was crazy if he just tried to explain it, even with the strange episode with the magical beer into apple juice episode.

Malissa had brought that up only once after it had happened, and they simply chalked it up to being drunker than they had originally thought.

I need to keep this down low... As much as I can until I can get an answer...

Hunter forced himself out of bed, and stumbled over to his desk where his laptop had been left charging for the night. After logging in to wrap up an assignment, he reflexively opened up the Egyptology website to see if he had any messages.

He had expected the same empty inbox that he had seen all the other dozen times that he had checked, but he blinked in astonishment as he saw that he had a message pending.

Clicking on it, his heart pounding in his chest he saw a single line of text in response to his original message.

3:00 P.M. in study room 402.

That's in the library... and during my Calc class to boot...

Hunter bit his lip, his mind racing as he tried to figure this out. Somehow, whoever was on the other end was near enough to have access to his university. Perhaps they had waited to respond to his message until they had managed to arrive nearby.

Why on earth do they want to meet with me?

The fennec's sense of suspicion rose as he considered whether he should ditch his class for this strange meeting. It would undoubtedly bite him in the tail in the long run, seeing how his math grade hung in the balance after his last test score.

Continuously getting random magical episodes of baby stuff is probably going to make things equally if not more impossible anyway.

It was decided, he would come up with some excuse that he hoped Malissa's keen sense of intuition would not see through. Jack would buy it, ditching class was something he would happily relate to after all, especially math.

Pity nobody else in the class was doing as well as Hunter, he was sure that between Malissa's and Jack's notes that day he would get only about 80% of what was covered that day. Hunter sighed, running a paw through his headfur as he felt his sense of stress increase the more he thought about it.

Meeting someone completely anonymous in a university library study room to deal with a curse that nobody except one other person would believe.

What could possibly go wrong...

© © ©

Hunter was sitting in the study room and checking the time on his phone every thirty seconds. He had arrived in study room 402 a whole half hour early, as he was keen to gain some clarity if any on the brooch's curse.

The room was completely quiet save for the soft hum of the central air unit running through a vent in the ceiling. He could practically hear his own heartbeat in the stillness, a fact he was not too thrilled about given the rate it was pumping away at.

He had almost abandoned the idea all together, and was wondering whether he should cut his losses and arrive at his class late. Better than nothing at all, after all.

The fennec fox checked his phone once more, biting his lip as his tail swished agitatedly from side to side, brushing against the wooden seat of his chair. He could have spent the time working on an assignment on his laptop, but his nerves were far too active for him to be able to concentrate on school.

The oddity of the situation was not lost upon him, seeing how he imagined such anonymous meetings only happened with criminals online. Was he going to get in trouble? Was this brooch Aunt Tare left him even hers to give?

Maybe that would be a good thing...

If he had the brooch taken away from him, it could be possible that it would take the curse with it. Not that he wanted anybody else to have to deal with his current problems, but whatever Egyptian artifacts collectors did was their business. He knew his aunt had made more than a few enemies in the past, and getting associated with them because of his relation to her was not something he needed right now.

I'd chuck it in the gutter at this point...

Hunter heard the doorknob turn, and his heart skipped a beat. As the door opened, he was greeted by the sight of an relatively unassuming honey badger wearing a hoodie and jeans.

"Your library security's pretty scuffed, mate. All I had to do was run to the photocopy store and my student ID worked just fine."

The badger had an Australian accent, clearly hailing from a continent other than the one that his species was indigenous to. His eyes were a deep brown, and he appeared the image of friendly as he dropped his backpack next to the table and pulled out a chair.

It took a second for Hunter to find his voice, after which he managed to stutter out a question.

"Who- Who are you?"

"Now *that* is an interesting question."

The badger responded, turning the chair around a hundred and eighty degrees before sitting himself down with a sigh and leaning his fuzzy forearms on the chair back.

He lowered his head, resting them on his arms as he studied Hunter for a few seconds. The two stared at each other, Hunter wondering whether he was about to get interrogated or whether the meeting was some sort of trapped. He was half right, as the badger leaned back and glanced up at the ceiling as he queried.

"So, tell me Hunter. When was the last time you talked with your dear old Auntie Tare?"

Hunter looked down at the table in front of him, spreading his paws out palms facing him as he thought for a moment. Seeing how he might have wanted answers as badly as the badger he decided to push aside his concerns for the moment and cooperate.

"Christmas party a long time ago, I was still a kid. I pretty much know nothing about her other than the fact that she would occasionally send some money to my college fund."

The badger nodded morosely, his ear flicking as the only indication of impatience as he prompted once more.

"But recently my sources tell me she has reached out to you through a law firm following her recent disappearance. Can you tell me--"

"Wait, you don't know if she's alive? What happened to her, I thought you'd have some answers for me."

The badger raised a single finger up to stymie Hunter's barrage of questions. Hunter fell silent, realizing that he had interrupted the honey badger. The badger spoke, his accent coming out as more distinct as he responded.

"Our sources have not identified what happened to Auntie Tare, no. But if there's one thing we know it's that that old cat wouldn't have gone out without a fight. There's been no fight, no evidence of it anyway. I'm just here to see if there might be anything you know that could help us find her whereabouts?"

Hunter stared at him, realizing that he did not know whether this badger's intentions with his aunt were good or bad.

"Who are you?"

The fennec asked, setting his jaw stubbornly as he maintained eye contact with the badger. Rolling his eyes, the badger said nothing but reached into his pocket. Pulling out a wallet, he unsheathed his claws before rustling through a mixture of bank notes and receipts.

"Ere."

He said, placing a photograph flat on the table and pushing it towards the little fox.

"I'm her strongman."

Hunter looked down, and saw in the image a collection of furs including his Aunt and the badger sitting in front of him. The badger was holding what appeared to be a shotgun, a wicked grin on his face while his Aunt was looking away from the photographer as she was busy scrutinizing a hieroglyph covered wall.

"So..."

Hunter started, his eyes still fixed on the photograph.

"You worked with the archaeologists as hired protection?"

"So to speak..."

Replied the badger, his response dismissive as he reached forward to retrieve the photograph.

"Let's try this again."

The badger continued, as he saw that Hunter's nerves had been somewhat assuaged.

"Tell me what you know about your Aunt."

Hunter hesitated, and then decided to bite the bullet. He started with when he first acquired the artifact, and then admitted to the strange happenings. As the badger's eyebrows became raised at the absurdity of his claims, he hastily followed up by recounting the letter his Aunt had left him confirming the nature of the ancient brooch.

The badger listened intently throughout the entire explanation. As Hunter ran out of steam, the mammal stood up and paced once from one end of the room the other.

"Not what I was expecting..."

He muttered to himself, before turning back to the fox and clearing his throat.

"Thank you, Hunter. I'll get back to you if we need any more information."

The badger turned to leave, but Hunter bolted upright from his chair as he exclaimed.

“Wait! Please, I need some kind of solution here. I’ve been cursed for crying out loud, you can’t just leave me like this!”

The badger sighed once more, rolling his eyes and muttering something under his breath. His back still turned, he looked up at the ceiling once more as he spoke.

“Look mate, whatever it is that’s got your knickers in a twist is not going to get resolved until we can locate your dear Aunt Tare, capish? Sit tight for now.”

Aghast, Hunter watched in disbelief as the badger exited the room after hoisting up the backpack he had come in with.

Slowly, as if not to disturb something in the room, Hunter sat himself back down onto his chair and stared dumbly at the table in front of him.

That’s it? I just told him I got a letter from my Aunt and a brooch and he leaves?

Hunter realized that it might not have been in the badger’s interest to help him to begin with. After all, he had only asked about Aunt Tare and nothing else. Even the brooch did not appear to interest him. Whether the badger was missing his paycheck or actually more concerned about his aunt Hunter was not sure of.

One thing remained clear, however. Whatever happened to him and the continual influence of the curse, it all depended on whether that badger and whatever other members of her team were working on finding her managed to locate her.

Hunter grimaced, quickly pushing himself back from the table and making his way over to the door.

He needed to pee, and he already knew what was likely to happen if he tried to hold it for much longer.