

Chapter Sixteen

The Christmas Party

14 years earlier...

Agatha Tare gazed out at the motley collection of furs that milled about her. She noted a group of mildly overweight men eyeing the eggnog in the corner, glancing from each other to their wives as if daring each other to make the first move.

The cheetah allowed herself a small smile of amusement, her earlier sense of annoyance dissipating as she reminded herself that she should be grateful for such small social details of regular civilian life.

Better than wondering whether the blue-eyed skink in front of you is hiding a shink in his drawers...

Her grin broadened. Sure, she was more than a little bored of the idle small-talk she was forced to endure. None of the people had anything tangible to offer her other than small, impersonal compliments about her stature for her age. But family was family, and her niece had insisted in multiple letters that she make the trip home for the holidays.

As if sensing that her Aunt was thinking about her, a petit fennec maneuvered her way past to the bears that were now helping themselves to the aforementioned eggnog while doing their best to act as casual as possible.

"Auntie."

Camilla beamed, the fennec's eyes sparkling the same shade of emerald as the cheetahs. It was their little joke, that despite the vast genetic difference in their respective species that it was they and only they that were actually related. Agatha had been adopted, a fact that she undoubtedly was sure had spawned her aptitude for maintaining her cool while in spaces she did not belong.

Her family had done their best to include her, but to be a female cat that towered above her vulpine relations was an aspect of her physiology that always served to remind her that she did not belong.

But that was decades ago.

Still, it was only with Camilla that she did not feel as if she were an alien living amongst dwarves.

“Sweetheart, it’s good to see you.”

The two embraced, several of the other furs giving them space as even those who met Agatha at eye level found her mildly intimidating. Perhaps it was her choice of dress, a dazzlingly green dress held together by a brooch on her upper left breast. The opals sparkled in the radiance given off the Christmas tree lights, giving the item an alluringly dangerous aura.

“You don’t even know how happy I am that you were able to make it, how was the flight?”

Agatha shook her head, closing her eyes for a moment and smiling closed-lipped. Camilla was quick on the uptake.

“Did they put you in the cargo hold again?”

Agatha put an offended paw on her chest, recoiling slightly as she pretended to appear insulted.

“That’s rich coming from someone who would fit comfortably in the overhead luggage compartment.”

Camilla beamed, twisting her shoulders from side to side while clasping her paws in front of her. It was her adorable face, one she knew that the cheetah had an immense soft spot for.

“They say I’m so light I actually help keep the aircraft aloft!”

Agatha laughed, a sharp high pitched bark coming from her throat as her shoulders shook. It was an alarming sound, rich with mirth to cause the other houseguests to falter in their respective conversations. The two ignored them, uncaring that their conversation was drawing attention.

The cheetah felt her sense of boredom disappear entirely, forgotten now that she was in the presence of one of the few family members she truly loved. As she felt warmth blooming in her face, her mind darted back to the latest mention in Camilla’s letters.

“Well, are you going to introduce us?”

Camilla’s eyes blanked for a moment, before lighting up in recognition of what Agatha was insinuating. She yipped, excitedly nodding before nodding over towards the direction of the other room.

“Yes, of course! We’ve given him a Christmas present to open early, he’s in his bedroom.”

After Camilla excused herself from a guest that was inquiring if there was any more eggnog available, the fennec guided the cheetah through the hall and through an open bedroom door.

A small kit was sitting cross-legged on the floor, currently in the midst of constructing a miniature LEGO set and completely occupied by the task.

“Hunter sweetheart, I’d like you to meet your Great Aunt.”

The kit looked up, his eyes wide with curiosity as he looked at the cheetah. He appeared a bit unsure at first, the intimidating visage of the African cat causing him some pause in what to say next. A second later, however, he recovered and spoke up.

"It's nice to meet you."

Camilla beamed, happy that her son had remembered his manners. Closed-lipped, Agatha smiled back and nodded a greeting while blinking once. She studied him for a moment, noting that she appeared the spitting image of his mother, save for his eyes.

He met her gaze, raising her degree of respect for him as he appeared relatively comfortable with someone that was a good five times his own height.

He'll do.

She thought to herself, raising a paw reflexively to her brooch and adjusting it. Camilla continued to speak, introducing Agatha.

"This is Auntie Tare, she's an Egyptologist situated in Egypt if you'll believe it."

Chortling, the fennec nudged the cheetah in the side and gave her a look. Agatha got the message, and stooped down to peer at the half-constructed pile of plastic bricks that Hunter was working on.

"Why don't you tell me what you're working on there, Hunter?"

His eyes lighting up, the kidfur launched into a detailed explanation as to what he was trying to make. Of all things, it was a replica of the tomb of Tutankhamen. Agatha found herself rather intrigued by the spirit and vocabulary of the little fennec, surprised by the fact that she was more interested in what he had to say about his construction set than the droning on of the adults she had left behind.

Camilla eventually excused herself, pleased to see that the two appeared to be bonding almost immediately. Agatha found herself sitting cross-legged beside Hunter, aiding in the construction of the LEGO set. Hunter was quite pleased to have a partner in his project, and eagerly handed over several of the bricks for her to work on in parallel to him.

The cheetah was enjoying herself, though she would not have predicted this. Normally she was dismissive of children, but there was something special about spending time with one that she was related to. She found him cute, and realized that she actually cared for him in the same manner she cared for her niece Camilla.

Agatha was a hardy beast, and only a few times in her life had she actually found any affection for anyone else. But Hunter was different, small and young as he was, she found that she was already beginning to feel proud to be able to call herself his Aunt.

Within the hour, they had completed the LEGO set. Raising a paw up, Agatha's voice caught in her throat at the awkwardness at her attempt to bond with the little fox.

But Hunter was quick on the uptake, smacking it gently with his own; the little fennec smiled toothily at his aunt, pleased by the high five.

"Very good Hunter, this looks just like the real thing!"

She was not lying either, whoever had designed the set clearly had studied the schematics of the ancient tomb themselves. Hunter replied with excitement in his voice.

"Have you been there? Momma mentioned that you worked with Egyptians."

Dead ones, mostly. Or soon to be.

Agatha thought grimly to herself, but quickly nodded serenely after having decided that shielding this young fox was now her duty.

"Indeed I do, I've actually seen a mummy before in real life as well."

“A mummy! I’ve got one of those!”

Agatha laughed. He really had a spark in his head, undoubtedly inherited from his mother. The cheetah could hardly believe herself, she was actually enjoying spending time with her nephew. Her heart hurt, the same way it hurt whenever she thought about how it was only Camilla who had ever understood her.

The regal cheetah had reached a decision, even as she launched into a family friendly version of one of her adventures she had become resolute in her latest desire.

He would inherit her gifts. This little kit, young as he was, had shown no fear in connecting with her despite the fact that she always seemed to stand out. He was deserving of her great feats, and she would do everything in her power to ensure that his life was a long and happy one.

Almost too soon, Camilla was at the door appearing exceptionally pleased. She spoke, powdered sugar on her apron.

“Hunter, would you and Auntie Tare like some gingerbread cookies? They’re fresh out of the oven.”

Hunter looked to Agatha, his eyes wide with excitement and Agatha found that she could not have said no even if she had wanted to.

“Make sure you leave some for Santa Claws”

She replied with a smile, her teeth showing now as her face relaxed. As Hunter practically leapt to his feat, grabbing his aunt by the paw and pulling her out of his bedroom, Camilla and Agatha exchanged a quick look.

Camilla appeared slightly amused at how much Agatha was allowing herself to show that she was having fun.

But for once, the cheetah did not have a care in the world as to what people were judging her for. She was spending time with her nephew, a small window of her life she knew she would treasure for the rest of her life.

She could only hope that Hunter would remember her as fondly as she would him.