

Chapter Twenty-Three

Jack's Gamble

Jack had always been under the impression that he was a very, very clever weasel. Sure, he had never properly applied himself in school, nor had he shown any particular interest in a craft or anything that would be useful in a career. There was only one exception, and that was his ability to ingratiate himself to just about any fur he set his mind on. Weasels were often stereotyped for being crafty, tricky, and the type of fur that you would have a hard time trusting. Jack knew this, and despite the borderline racial stereotyping his kind of species received at first glance, he had made the decision from a young age to use it to his advantage.

He was eager, honest, and openly naive about his interests and activities. He played a lot of video games, liked to slack off and get stoned with his friends, and generally did little to cultivate himself as a productive member of society beyond engaging in as many social events as he could. He knew a lot of people, and a lot of people knew him. Jack was the comedian, the butt of the joke, the guy who would never back down from a perilous dare no matter how stupid an idea it was that he was presented with.

The weasel liked how he led his life, even if he occasionally had to get a lecture from Malissa about just emphatically impressed she was at how apparently empty the space between his ears was.

In order to fund his lazy weekend smoking weed and playing games with his fellow coasting friends, Jack had the responsibility of procuring the stuff given his disposition to get into places he very much should not be venturing into. He knew of a bar a few blocks south of the university, the place he usually went to meet with his drug dealer. While the weasel had never gone inside, as every week there seemed to be a burly ox or grizzly bear shouting drunkenly being escorted by policemen after having torn up the place, he knew that the shadier characters in the city were particularly fond of this haunt.

The weasel glanced up at the neon sign stating, "Swine's Cradle".

That is so on the nose...

He thought grimly to himself, edging his way past the security guard standing stalwartly outfront. Jack evaded the bull terrier's suspicious glare, slipping inside and making his way directly towards the bar front. His sights were fixed on a jackal, who was currently examining the cloudy contents of an empty glass that was frustrating her efforts to polish. It was early in the morning, so the dregs of last night's alcoholic responsibilities were currently slouched, scattering amongst several seats and stools throughout the eerily quiet pub. This was exactly how Jack wanted it, as this would likely attract the least amount of attention for what he was going to investigate.

"Hey, Shiva."

The jackal looked up from the glass, giving the weasel an impatient look before returning her attention back down at the Sisyphean task she was keeping herself busy with.

"What, rat."

Ignoring the nickname, Jack hopped up on a barstool before thinking twice and moving one seat to the side. The ox that was currently taking a nap face down on the bar surface appeared particularly muscular, which the weasel wanted to give a wide berth.

"What do you know about Egyptian talismans?"

The jackal stopped what she was doing, her upper lip curling as she placed the glass down with a little more force than was necessary. Lazily, she turned her head towards the inquiring weasel as she flopped the rag down next to the glass.

"If you're looking to buy more weed you don't have to start with borderline racist small talk, you hear?"

The weasel gulped, shaking his head and holding up his paws in an attempt to placate her.

“No no! I’m... Uh, not here to buy weed... This time... I figured you might know something about them... I... Uh... Have a project and-”

“You want homework help? Are you fucking serious?”

Jack could see that he was only making things worse by explaining himself further, so he decided to double down on supplication instead.

“Look, I just need a few minutes of your inside and I’m gone, alright? I just figured I’d ask. I’m in dire straits for my grade here.”

Jack had had to think quickly on his feet, and he hoped that she would not call his bluff. It was the end of finals week, sure, but it was a Sunday morning. The jackal gave him a once over, glaring at him with two golden irises that in the right light sometimes appeared to be glowing. She snorted, looking down once more before picking her glass up once more. Without looking at him, she spoke.

“You need someone with Pharaoh’s blood to be able to do anything about the ones that are left...”

Jack, for once, remained completely silent. He was sure that she had just called his bluff, but he hesitated to admit that her assumption that he himself was dealing with an Egyptian artifact was spot on. He waited quietly, his paws placed on top of the paw as he did his best to steady his breathing. The jackal continued, her heavy accent coming through as she continued to dictate.

“Easily said than done finding the ones that are left, although my great grandmother allegedly had a piece of one. Even harder to find someone with Pharaoh’s blood that’s willing to cooperate let alone not take the talisman for themselves...”

She sniffed once, ebony nostrils flaring as she held the glass up to the dim light illuminating the bar surface. Jack followed her gaze, seeing to his mild surprise that the glass was now completely transparent. With a satisfied smirk on her muzzle, she set the glass aside before moving in front of Jack and placing her paws on the surface of the bar in a domineering gesture. The weasel looked up at her bleakly, his ears pinned against the top of his head as he gazed back with wide, watery eyes. The jackal spoke softly, the usual gruffness in her voice now gone to be replaced with a tone that was almost soft.

“Whatever you’re dealing with, kid, this isn’t something you want to get entangled with. Stick to flunking classes and smoking weed if you know what’s good for you.”

She gave him a meaningful look before pushing herself back and waving a paw over the back of her head.

“Now get out of my sight.”

Jack’s heart was pounding, the information he had received with minimal prompting had sounded very promising, if a little confusing. Hastily he pushed himself off of the stool, almost tripping and falling off of it as he scampered towards the exit of the bar. Behind him, he heard Shiva’s voice rising as she raised her voice to rouse the sleeping drunkards.

“Wake up, assholes! If I don’t see your tails exiting the bar in the next ten minutes I’m calling Jeff to give you the *express* ticket home!”

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Hunter’s knee was bouncing up and down at a frantic pace. His anxiety was through the roof, for it had not abated since he opened his university email that morning to find an email from his calculus professor waiting for him. The message was briefly, simply telling him the window of time that his office would be open that afternoon for Hunter to come see him. It had been polite, if a little short, and it had

seemed to be more an offer than a firm command for Hunter to see him. The fennec had been strapped for ideas on how to deal with the situation that had arisen during his calculus final. Malissa had advised that he let the situation be for now, as she figured that the polar bear was likely trying to figure out the same thing.

There had only been one point of correspondence before then from the bear, which had been an email to the entire class stating that only problems that had been given full answers would be graded, and that any questions left partially answered would be given partial credit if the work appeared to be trending towards the right answer. This had come as a source of great delight to the majority of the class, as the easier questions had been situated towards the beginning of the exam. Because of this, Jack had figured he had a chance to pass the class, barely.

The door to the polar bear's office was closed, a small sign hanging on a string reading that the bear was currently out of the office. Hunter figured that his teacher was simply out for lunch, and had decided to wait for a while to get this over with. Hunter could feel a small tremor registering on the bottom of his paws, which he figured was caused by the approaching footsteps of the bear making his way up the stairs. A few seconds later, the door to the staircase opened with a squeak and the visage of the polar bear loomed into view.

The professor stopped in his tracks as he caught sight of Hunter, a grimace coming over his muzzle as he smiled awkwardly at the Fennec.

"You got a hundred."

He said flatly, motioning towards the door of his office with a heavy paw before continuing to speak.

"Now that hard part, come inside."

Hunter nodded, the brief spike of delight at hearing his grade was quickly washed over by the wave of anxiety of what was about to come. He was not sure whether he would be able to fully explain what happened to the bear without sounding

crazy. He figured he would let the bear speak first, walking inside and sitting himself down awkwardly in the seat in front of the professor's desk. The polar bear leaned back in his armchair, placing his paws on his chest and folding his claws together. He chuffed, appearing somewhat lost for words before he let out a grunt of displeasure.

"Alright, lets get it over with. The physician I saw yesterday explained to me that what occurred was likely a fugue state. He did not sound too sure of himself, and the fact that items I don't remember putting in my briefcase appeared there can't be explained by loss of volition like that. Would you care to share your thoughts on the incident?"

Hunter took a deep breath, his voice catching in his throat as a small, muffled groan left his muzzle. He closed his mouth again, looking down at the surface of the polar bear's desk and blinking twice in quick succession. The fennec figured he would follow in the polar bear's directness and reciprocate with his own. In a flat tone, he began to lay it out.

"My aunt's inheritance is an Egyptian artifact that has cursed me with eternal youth. It makes the world around me become infantilized, and recently its started to affect other people around me and not just myself."

Hunter looked up to assess the polar bear's reaction. His professor was frozen, staring at him with two, pale blue eyes that flitted from one of Hunter's peepers to the other. The expression on the polar bear's muzzle appeared to be somewhere between incredulous and offended. A few seconds later, the polar bear sighed and drew a large paw over his muzzle. He let out a groan, his voice rumbling in his throat as the sound came through a long exhalation. The fox flitted with his paws, the hair on his tail standing on end in agitation as he waited for the bear to speak. At last, he did.

"Hunter I can't believe I'm saying this, but I believe what you just said more than I believed the judgment of my licensed physician."

The bear hesitated, looking down at his opened paws as if trying to find an answer inscribed on them. He let out a sound of disgust, then barked out a short laugh, before resuming his previous lazy seriousness as he spoke.

“I’ve already spoken with the Chair of Public Outreach to discuss a donation I am going to be giving to the local pediatric hospital. Here’s the story...”

The bear nodded to him in a practiced manner, a gesture that he most likely had practiced with many students before. It beckoned for Hunter to pay close attention, which the fennec needed no further prompting for.

“You and I pulled a charity stunt, but there was a mix-up. We were both under the impression that the fliers for such an event were handed out, and we performed our little ‘stunt’ under the impression that people knew. It doesn’t cover all of our bases, but it’s an easier explanation for people to swallow than whatever the hell actually happened. It’ll help me keep my tenure, paint you in a selfless light, and make it a more understandable event to make light of. Do you understand?”

Hunter nodded solemnly. The idea was clever, if not entirely comprehensive. The fennec suspected that the polar bear had been busy pulling several strings to prevent such a thing from spiraling out of control, judging by the lines underneath his professor’s eyes. The fennec swallowed, opening his muzzle as if to say something but then finding he had nothing further to comment. This was simple, and with winter break coming up people would find other things to talk about before the next semester started.

For a moment, Hunter wondered if this was the trinket’s work. Did it inspire the polar bear to come up with such an idea? The fennec looked up at the bear once more, scrutinizing him for a moment before deciding against that notion. His professor appeared haggard, as sleepless as Hunter was when he was first dealing with the artifact’s influence. The fennec shifted in his seat, his padding’s muffled crinkling meeting his ears to the fox’s embarrassment.

The bear did not appear to notice, as he was massaging his temples with the ends of his claws. He spoke, his voice sounding fatigued.

“Okay... That’s it... I want nothing to do with this anymore... You can go...”

Without needing any further prompting, Hunter hastily made his way up to his paws and was halfway out the door when the bear called back out to him.

“And Hunter...”

“Y-yes?”

The bear pursed his lips, giving the fox a bemused expression as he continued.

“Whatever it is you’re dealing with... Good luck... And don’t involve me in it anymore...”

Hunter gave the polar bear a weak smile, nodding once before lingering in the doorway for a moment longer.

“Thank you for the semester, sir.”

“You did well.”

The polar bear waved a paw, and Hunter made short work of leaving his office as he shouldered his backpack onto his bag. It had gone better than he accepted, but the small fox still felt like he wanted to get away from the bear’s office. He was likely one of the last few remaining students on the campus, and he wanted to make his way back to his apartment to start packing. His flight was leaving early the next day, and if there was anything that the fox needed at that moment it was some time away from the box containing the cursed brooch.