

FOUR

Aldin slowly awoke, feeling dizzy. He shook his head and looked about. He was in the hovercraft, laying on his designated cushion. The hovercraft wasn't moving. His mouth was very dry.

"How are you feeling? Did you enjoy your forced nap?" Giguere asked.

Aldin blinked a few times and shook his head again. "Sorry, after affects are still bothering me. What was that?"

"Something we use to temporarily knock out wild cousins so they can be tagged. Fortunately, you were almost sitting on the drone and it wasn't too badly damaged."

Aldin slowly sat up and felt a wave of nausea. He sat very still while waiting for it to pass. "I'm a bit sore from the landing, but I think I'll be fine. Where is my 'mate'?" He held up a couple of claws on each hand and dangled them as he said mate.

"Karle is attending to her outside, waiting for her to come around, though it would be better for her not to see you or any of us when she awakens. Unfortunately, we can't take the chance some predator would come along before the gas wears off completely."

Aldin slowly nodded. "Thank you." He poured himself a little water and lapped it up. "That helps."

"We've been able to get a reading on her epidermal tag. She was tagged last spring about 5 kamits (kilometers) north of here. It doesn't make sense that she would travel this far for a new territory. It's not like the area is overpopulated with wild cousins."

"That does sound puzzling. While we never bothered to study the habits of our wild cousins back on Terra, I doubt any of them travelled that kind of distance."

They both turned in startlement at a high pitched keening wail.

"Stay here, Ambassador," Giguere stated as he went outside and over to Karle. The keening seemed to double.

"BIGGENS KILL! NOOOOO!!!!" The wild squirrel cried out and keened again.

Aldin couldn't resist the call. He came forward next to the two larger graduate students.

The wild squirrel stared at him, but didn't move towards him as he was too close to the biggens. "You no dead?!"

“Biggens make sleep. I wake. You wake. You safe.”

“No safe.” She shook herself all over trying to shake off the after effects of the gas. “Biggens no safe. Biggens hunt. Make sleep. Make male nestling sleep. I wake. Flee. Male nestling no wake. Predator kill. Eat. I flee,” she held up both front paws, “days. Biggens return. Hunt...”

“No.” Aldin interrupted. “We no hunt.” He pointed to himself, Karle and Giguere. “We leave. You safe.”

“Come, we flee biggens. Biggens no safe.”

Aldin turned to the two graduate students. “Please get down on your hands like a wild cousin.”

“What?” Karle asked.

“I want her to see you’re not that scary. She might come and sniff you.”

Karle rolled his eyes, but did as Aldin asked. Giguere did likewise.

Aldin turned to the wild squirrel. “Come. Biggens let you smell them. They no harm you.”

“Skunk no spray?”

Aldin translated for Karle. He replied, “As long as she doesn’t try to bite me.”

“You no bite, he no spray,” Aldin said to her.

She slowly and cautiously came over and sniffed both the graduate students. Karle looked annoyed while Giguere looked amused. When she was finished, Aldin beckoned her over to him.

“Now you smell me again. Slowly.”

He stood still as she did so. She chattered her teeth as her eyes widened.

“You, biggen squirrel, smell same.”

(affirmativeflick) “Yes. I small biggen. I sorry. Small biggen and squirrel no make pups. Biggen elders forbid.”

Her tail drooped as tears formed in her eyes. She quickly bit him on the left forearm, whipped around, and raced up the nearest tree and was quickly out of sight.

Aldin didn't cry out from the sudden assault, partly because it happened so quickly. Giguere quickly pulled out the first aid kit to treat the wound, which wasn't that serious or deep. Karle finally relaxed. Aldin hadn't noticed how tense he was until he relaxed.

"Are you alright, Karle?"

Karle blinked a moment as he got up off his hands. "Yes. And you?"

"Minor bite. I guess she," he paused a moment, "I'm not sure what the word is in Common. In English, it would be 'divorced' me, meaning when two mates break-up. She's decided I'm no longer her mate."

As Giguere put away the first aid kit, Karle nodded. "Can you tell me what you and she said?" he asked.

"There is no point hanging around here. We should get going. I will translate the whole event as you play it back on the hovercraft's large flat panel as we head back to campus."