

ELEVEN

As the hovercraft approached the university, Butternut was up on the 'ledge' next to the hovercraft's clear dome. She looked about with a combination of curiosity and fear, her tail twitching back and forth.

"Few, small trees. Large gaps. Many biggens," She whispered as her tail continued to wigwag back and forth.

"I did warn you."

She almost jumped having forgotten that Aldin was there with her, and had apparently overheard her whispered concerns. She looked down at him. "Yes," she drooped her tail. "I be brave."

"It can be hard. When I first come among biggens, I very, very scared." He paused. "Most biggens no chitterspeak. I learn biggenspeak. In biggenspeak your name is," he switched to Common and said her name. At her request, he repeated it a few times.

The hovercraft came to a stop next to a row of others like it and opened. Aldin jumped out and waited. Butternut hesitated, wigwagging her tail.

"Elder, you safe. Come. Follow."

She leapt down next to him. He led the way into one of the buildings and she stuck close behind him, but froze as the door closed behind them.

(nervouschitter) "Trap!"

Aldin sighed. "No, Butternut, watch." Aldin scampered back towards the door, tripping a sensor and it opened. He stepped back and it closed. "You safe. You get close, it open. Come." He turned around and led her down a corridor and then up a flight of stairs. Fortunately, they didn't encounter any students along the way. Aldin paused in front of Dr. Kaynobble's office door and scratched.

"Come in, Aldin and Butternut," Dr. Kaynobble chittered out.

Aldin pushed the door open enough to slip in. He waited for Butternut who hesitated, but followed.

"I close door," Aldin warned her.

"You safe," Dr. Kaynobble, who had gotten down on his hands, stated and pointed to an open window with his tail. "Tree out there if you no feel safe."

Butternut scampered over to the window, leapt up on the ledge, looked out, and, nodded. She turned around and quickly leapt straight to Dr. Kaynobble, clearing the slightly over one mit distance with ease. Dr. Kaynobble barely sat-up in time to catch her in his embrace. She nuzzled his fur as she hugged him. He gently stroked her back fur while they embraced.

“I so missed you, Raoul,” she exclaimed in Common before disengaging though her speech was a little slurred. “My speech may be a bit rusty,” she stated still slurring a bit, “but it’s good to be back. How long has it been? I’ve lost track.”

“You’ve been living in the forest preserve for about six years, ‘Butternut,’” he replied in Common. “I’m glad to see you haven’t gone completely wild cousin on me.”

Aldin stared at both of them.

Butternut (gigglechittered). “Actually, I had nearly gone completely wild cousin.” She drooped her tail briefly and then pointed it at Aldin. “Then he arrived. As soon as he spoke in ‘biggenspeak,’ it all started to quickly come back. It was,” she paused flicking her tail back and forth a moment in thought, “difficult to keep the wild cousin facade up on the ride back, especially after you called him. It is also,” she paused a moment as her tail continued to wigwag, “difficult to suppress the wild cousin fears after living that way for so long. I know neither of you are no danger to me, but part of me wants to leap out that window, and up the tree screeching a warning to others.” She shuddered. “It’s hard, just as my escort here warned me. I’m embarrassed that the automatic door closing behind us as we entered the building scared me as much as it did.”

“I should not be so surprised,” Aldin responded. “You stopped leaving wet paw prints as soon as I agreed to bring you to see how ‘Biggens’ live. Your chitterspeak was better than the others, and you picked-up on new words quickly with little need for comparison to understand what they were for.”

“Aldin,” Dr. Kaynobble pointed to Butternut, “this is Dr. Gowandle. She used to be a ‘Biggen’ squirrel,” he paused, “and we were very close to one another.”

“There was an accident in my lab. I was an organic chemistry professor back then. I physically regressed into a wild cousin, complete with the full instincts, yet I kept my ‘biggen’ mind intact. After the accident I went into undercover wild cousin research, which simply made sense at that moment. At the time I moved into the forest preserve, the cause of my accident had yet to be determined.” She looked him over. “Apparently, someone ignored safety protocols and, I assume, you’re the victim of a similar accident. I’m so sorry.” She drooped her tail.

“No, that’s not the case, Dr. Gowandle,” Dr. Kaynobble briefly paused. “Or do you want to now be called Butternut?”

She flicked her tail back and forth in thought a moment. “I, actually, like Butternut for some reason, Raoul. It feels more fitting to my current form than my birth name. But let’s keep that for when we’re not in front of students.” She glanced over at Aldin.

He chuckled and then continued. “Butternut, this is not one of my students. Technically, you could call him a special assistant, I suppose. This is Al-den Bush-E-tail the Younger, Ambassador of the Nah-mah-can’t-ah Free Squirrels of the planet Terra.” He struggled a bit with the English parts. He paused a moment and then clarified. “The term, Ambassador, is from his people. It is the title for a Representative of a local government that is not part of the world government. Though his people aren’t local, as the representative from another world, it still fits him.”

Aldin bowed with a smirk on his muzzle as he said in English and repeated in both chitterspeak and Common, “I am delighted to meet you, Butternut.”

Butternut’s tail wigwagged back and forth rapidly in a corkscrew as she leapt up on the windowsill and chattered quietly trying to fight down the fear instincts that suddenly welled up from the surprising news. “You weren’t making that up back in the hovercraft?”

(negativeflick) “No, I tried to explain it the best I could in terms that a wild cousin might understand. My people’s chitterspeak is more extensive than that spoken by your wild cousins.”

“So I noticed as I struggled to grasp a lot of what you said.” She slowly worked her way back down off the windowsill though her tail continued to fearfully wigwag.

“And our ‘biggenspeak’ is called English. In old English, my name, Aldin, does mean Friend. However, I may not be from another planet in your galaxy. Terra could be an Earth in a parallel dimension. Who knows?” Aldin shrugged. “It would explain one thing your scientists, including Dr. Kaynobble, have confirmed.”

“And that is?”

“Genetically, he’s compatible with the local wild cousin population,” Dr. Kaynobble responded. “Even though he lacks the ear tufts found in our local wild cousins.”

Dr. Gowandle cursed quietly in disbelief while shaking her head. “I’m out playing wild cousin for six years, raising orphans along the way, and I miss out on the greatest biological discovery of our lifetime. How?” she hesitated and asked again, “How did...” and paused again in hesitation.

Dr. Kaynobble poured them some herbal tea, and laid out a tray of unsalted seeds and nuts as Aldin gave her the brief version. She only jumped a little at Dr. Kaynobble’s sudden movement.

She just shook her head in a combination of disbelief and wonder as Aldin finished, and then yawned.

“We need to talk more, but not right now,” she struggled with his title, “Embassador.” She paused again. “Right now what I would really like is a warm bath and then get some rest. It’s one of the things I missed out there.” She paused a moment, “And I think that explains something about you, Embassador.”

“Oh?” He raised his tail straight-up and briefly curled the top in a half-circle (curiousflick).

“When you invited my grandson and me to sniff you,” she paused at the look on Raoul’s muzzle. “Relax, Raoul, he’s adopted. As I mentioned earlier, while out there, I raised a few litters of orphans. It’ll all be in my report.” She turned back to Aldin, “As I was saying, when we sniffed you, you smelled just like a wild cousin, except, thinking about it now, you’re too clean, much like a ‘biggen’ smells.” She gigglechattered a moment. “There’s an undercurrent of soap for lack of a better way to describe it. Maybe that’s why my new granddaughter-in-law tried to choose you anyway. Maybe she just thought you had been trapped briefly by the ‘biggens’ and had been trying to escape when she met you and that undercurrent she smelled was due to them handling you.” She shrugged. “Who knows? Anyway, we can discuss this later.”

Dr. Kaynobble nodded. “You may bathe and stay at my place as I know you currently don’t have a place, Butternut.”

“Yes, that would be good. Thank you, Raoul.” She hesitated a moment looking at Aldin. “I hope we will talk more, later, Embassador. It’s been good to meet and learn about you. Thank you for transporting me back.”