

TWELVE

Butternut stepped out of Raoul's bathroom with an oversized-to-her towel wrapped around her damp body. She scampered over next to him, dragging part of the towel behind her to where he lay sprawled on a large cushion in front of his entertainment panel, which was off at the moment.

"Oh, Raoul, you don't know how good it felt to just soak," she exclaimed and chittered softly. "For the past six years I've had to settle for tongue baths. Doing that was so nasty at first, but I got used to it. From the color of the water, it definitely wasn't as effective, though. I can't thank you enough."

She fluffed up her damp fur with the towel and picked-up a child's brush and started to brush out her fur. She chitterpurred to herself as she worked out a few tiny mats in her pelt. It felt so good to properly brush her fur for the first time in years. "I regret losing the brush I took with me. Using one's claws and teeth isn't the same, I'll tell you."

As she prattled along, Raoul remained silent, though he watched her. She drooped her tail at his continued silence.

"You haven't said much since we arrived. What's wrong?"

He sighed deeply as he sat-up slowly so as to not startle her. "What's wrong? After the accident, you ran away on me. I'm upset and I shouldn't be, I know part of it was the overwhelming wild cousin instincts. You needed time to sort things out and I understand that. You've returned, yet, I'm still upset."

"Oh, Raoul," she drooped her tail, "I was so scared."

"I was willing to face the unknown with you."

"You didn't ask. And then after the accident, we would have been constantly harassed if you had. I wasn't ready for that yet. The instincts were always there as you know. It's just, somehow, 'biggens' have learned to mostly keep them under control. But after my change they're a lot closer to the surface now. It's not as easy to ignore them. I needed to sort things out. I couldn't put you through that."

"Six years I've waited for you to return, Butternut. How is now any different than six years ago?"

"Yes, I know. That wasn't part of the plan. I figured a year, maybe two. But every time I saw graduate students, they were in gas first and ask questions later mode. I had no interest in getting tagged." She looked down. "I was truly afraid of them, Raoul. And I didn't want to explain myself to any of them who were unaware of the accident. You could have come to get me."

Raoul sighed. "I thought about that many times. In the end you chose to go out there, so, in my mind, it had to be your choice on your own to return without my influence.

"When the Ambassador showed-up today calling himself a 'small biggen,' I saw my chance to come home. I was also afraid of him, but it was easier to get over my fears in his presence, probably because he is the same size as me. I just don't understand how he could remain so calm while my grandson and I were scrabbling at the hovercraft door chittering in sheer terror and panic."

"That part is easy and I'm glad it worked. He had earbuds in his ears programmed to drown-out any alarm chitterspeak." Raoul replied and flopped back down on his cushion. "When he suggested we start playing matchmaker, I was going to say no until he stated which male he was going to try and catch. I knew it was roughly in the territory you last were living in." He sighed deeply. "But, the way you eyed him in the office."

(gigglechitter) "Is my squirrel-at-heart jealous of an alien squirrel?" She paused. "Why would I openly show my affection for you in front of him if I was interested in him? He's quite handsome for an exotic wild cousin-like squirrel, even with those short, rounded ears." She smiled at him. "But there's definitely no spark there. And before you ask, I did not 'chose' any wild cousins for mates while living in the forest preserve. Some tried in vain to win me, but," (shudderflick) "I wasn't about to bear pups for a wild cousin. In my time out there, I adopted and raised three litters of just weened orphans, but I never bore pups of my own. Getting back to your other question, if people are accepting of the Ambassador, then maybe it wouldn't be so hard a time as I feared six years ago for us."

She yawned, put the brush down, and snuggled up next to him on the largish cushion. "I so missed you, Raoul." She whispered as she nuzzled his fur a little, "I wish we were compatible." She switched to chitterspeak, "carry your pups if could," she finished as she quickly drifted off to sleep. Raoul lay there a while with a lot of emotions racing through his head. After a while he, too, succumbed to sleep, not wanting to risk disturbing her by getting up to go into his bedroom.