

THIRTEEN

Butternut spent the entire following day dictating the beginning of her field notes from memory into a flatpanel. Much to her frustration, she quickly rediscovered how easily she could scratch-up the surface of a flatpanel with her claws. She had forgotten about that. Late afternoon, she decided it was time to take a break and work on dinner. She was amazed at the counters in Raoul's kitchen. At a touch of an icon on the flatpanel, they adjust down in height comfortable for her to work at. She wondered when he had those installed.

But then, she had a small problem. It had been so long since she had been in a kitchen she wasn't sure what to do or make. She knew Raoul would want more than some nuts and berries, which sounded appealing to her. She opened the cooler unit to see what he had for food. Her flatpanel chirped. Opening the cooler triggered a delayed message from Raoul with some simple suggestions that would work for both of them. She had just enough time to prepare salads for the two of them before he came home from the university. They made small talk for a while. Eventually, their relationship in the past came back to the surface.

"I was going to propose to you the day of the accident," Raoul finally confessed. "While you were recovering, I returned the wedding band I had purchased..."

Tears welled in her eyes as her tail drooped. "And after the past day-and-a-half, I realize how much I still love you, despite that there is no way we could now..." she choked up.

Raoul scooped her up and hugged her close. "It's alright," he whispered to her while gently stroking her back fur as she had always loved before the accident. "I understand, Butternut. It's my own fault. I was always too afraid to make the first move. And then the accident occurred. Hush...sssshhhh." He continued to embrace and rock her as she sobbed into his shoulder, wrapping her tail partially around him. "Let me finish. Never say never."

He reached over into a cabinet with his free hand and pulled a small box out. "I returned the wedding band in exchange for one that would fit the new you." He pulled the small wedding band out. "But you departed for the forest before I could propose. I would still have you after all this time, if you would have me."

"Really?" she muffled out and looked at him eye-to-eye.

"If I recall, there is a tradition among the people of your region," he continued as he gently pulling part of her left forepaw off his chest and nicked the palm of his hand with one of her little sharp claws. Her eyes widened. Without hesitation, she nicked her own forepaw.

In near unison they said to one another, "With no hesitation, regardless of what we may face, I pledge myself to you, Butternut/Raoul. Mate until death we part." They intermingled their blood and then licked each other's wounds. She clung tightly to him and cried, but now they were tears

of joy. They kissed. She slipped the band around her left wrist. He pulled a similar one out and slipped it over his own.

“We still need to find some witnesses and repeat our vows to make it official,” she said.

“That can wait, love,” Raoul replied, leading her to the door and a waiting hovercraft. “We’ve covered a tradition of your people. Now we should cover one from mine.” He winked at her.

Three clicks later, well past local sunset, the hovercraft settled again in front of their home. Both giggled like children as they tumbled out of hovercraft in each other’s embrace. There were twigs in their fur. If anyone had happened by at that time, they would have politely ignored the two as they reentered their home.

“I didn’t think you would ever be able to keep up,” she gigglechittered. “My squirrel-wanna-be makes a pretty good squirrel.”

“My wild cousins are nearly as good at climbing as squirrels, and I’ve been practicing. Alas, we raccoons can’t run straight down a trunk, love, as you quickly found out. Thank you for choosing branches that would hold-up under my larger body.”

He led her to the bathroom, where they bathed together picking the twigs out of each other’s fur. They towed off, brushed each other’s fur, and soon after, they fell asleep in each other’s embrace on their bed as if six years without each other hadn’t passed by.