

FOURTEEN

The following morning, they awoke to Raoul's flatpanel chirping with an incoming call. Raoul answered it and stared a moment at the brown pelted squirrel on his screen trying to recall her name. Butternut remained snuggled to him, but off screen.

"Aouphril, right? If I remember, you graduated last year. You and your mate have graciously hosted the Ambassador ever since."

"Yes, Dr. Kaynobble, that is correct," she answered with a bit of distress in her voice. "I'm calling because of the Ambassador. He won't be in today. He was just rushed to the clinic and they're transferring him to Hofstrah Medical University."

"What happened?" he asked. Butternut looked towards him with concern written across her muzzle for the alien squirrel.

"He complained about not feeling well last night and went to sleep early. This morning, he wouldn't stir and was very hot to the touch. High fever. Our household is under quarantine just in case."

"Thank you, Aouphril. I'll check in on him."

Aouphril showed relief on her muzzle. "Thank you. He's become a real close friend to Orlan and me." She ended the call.

"Best we both go over there. I suspect he caught whatever it is from our granddaughter-in-law." Butternut looked quizzically at him, so he continued. "When he had refused to couple with her, she bit him."

Butternut did her best to suppress a gigglechitter at what had occurred. "I bit more than my share of would-be courtiers out there, Raoul." She moved over to him and gently nibbled his ear. "But I'd never bite you that way unless you wanted me to." Again she gigglechittered and winked at him as she scampered out of their bed and into the bathroom.

Half a klick later, they were at the hospital and inquiring about Aldin. Some stared at Butternut as her accident hadn't been highly publicized. The matching wedding bands on her and Raoul's left arms also raised eyebrows. She left paw prints as she struggled to fight down the instinct to flee from all the "biggens" they passed by. It was harder coming back than she thought it would be. She tried her best to walk on just her hind legs in order to try and blend in, but it was difficult as a wild cousin's body wasn't designed to do so. They arrived in a waiting room. Soon, Dr.

Hanter hopped into the room, escorted by a younger hedgehog. The hedgehog immediately went over to Butternut.

“Dr. Gowandle? You’re back?” he exclaimed. “We should get you in an exam room right away.”

“This is the individual you were talking about, Dr. Territin, when discussing my patient?”

“Yes. As you can see, Dr. Gowandle, is physically a wild cousin.”

“I wasn’t originally this size, Doctor...”

“Hanter.” The elder bunny doctor replied. “I’m the Ambassador’s physician.”

She nodded. “Long story involving a lab accident that turned me physically into a wild cousin six years ago. I just met the Ambassador two days ago.”

“Do you have a head cold or recently suffered from one?”

(negative flick) “No. I feel just fine,” she replied, glancing back at her mate.

“We suspect a wild cousin she knows,” Dr. Kaynobble interjected, “who bit the Ambassador three days ago, gave him whatever it is that’s making him sick.”

“I still need to examine you to make sure,” Dr. Territin insisted and led her to another room.

“He was bitten?” Dr. Hanter asked.

“Yes. Here, watch.” Dr. Kaynobble called up the footage on his flatpanel.

“Yes, he does have a small scabbed-over wound on his left forearm. Is there any way you could trap that wild cousin?”

Dr. Kaynobble sighed. “Not easily, though she is Dr. Gowandle’s new granddaughter-in-law,” and he raised his left arm indicating his wedding band, “which makes her mine, too.”

Dr. Hanter’s ears shot straight up in alarm.

Realizing what he had just said, Dr. Kaynobble clarified. “She spent the last six years living among wild cousins, studying them up close as she could pass for one. About three years back she raised a litter of orphans after their mother had been killed by an owl. When they reached adulthood, one of them stayed in her territory, found a mate, and they had a litter, only for both to be killed by predators. I think she said it was a wild cousin fox that time. So, once again, she

raised the resulting orphans. As far as those wild cousin squirrels knew, she was their 'sire dame' or as we would say, grandmother."

Dr. Hanter relaxed and his flatpanel chirped. He poked an icon, read some text and looked-up.

"The Ambassador's blood tests are in." He read through the results. "He's suffering from what we consider a common cold. And he hasn't got any immunity against it."

"And because it's 'common', there's no vaccine, correct?"

"Even if we could develop one now, it wouldn't help him at this stage."

"How long has he got?"

Dr. Hanter drooped his ears a bit. "Unless he starts to turn around soon, maybe a few days."

50 cekklicks went by. Dr. Territin returned with Dr. Gowandle. "She's perfectly fit and healthy," he said to Dr. Hanter. There was a brief knowing glance between the hedgehog and his patient.

"Blood tests?"

"It'll be at least half a klick before I hear back. How's your patient?"

"As I just informed Dr. Kaynobble, he's got a few days at most." He filled them in.

Dr. Gowandle drooped her tail. "As what he has isn't dangerous to us, can we see him?"

"Of course. This way."

"We should also inform his hosts," Dr. Kaynobble added. "If this is a common cold, they don't need to be under quarantine any longer, right?"

"Yes, of course," Dr. Hanter replied. "I'll release them from quarantine immediately. But I only want my patient to have two visitors at a time."