

EIGHTEEN

Aldin awoke with a slight start until he remembered where he was. A male otter nurse was immediately at his side.

“Thirsty?”

He nodded. The nurse placed a small dish of water under his muzzle and he was able to freely lap at it. It didn’t take him long to lap all of it up. He was so thirsty. At least his throat didn’t feel like sandpaper anymore.

“Thank you,” he rasped. “How long?”

“You’ve slept straight through two days since the first time you awoke. Do you think you could hold down some solid food to supplement the nutrients we’ve been pumping in your arm?”

As if on cue, his stomach rumbled as food sounded like a good idea. “I’ll try,” he replied.

The otter wheeled over a small tray similar to what humans used in their own hospitals back on Terra. On it was a small bowl with a dozen or so pine nuts in it. Next to it was a piece of a branch from some sort of hardwood tree about the diameter of Aldin’s wrist and as long as his arm. The otter refilled his water dish and set that next to the nuts.

“Dr. Hanter’s orders. Whether or not you eat, he wants you to gnaw to naturally wear down your incisors. He’d prefer to not have to request another filing. Eat slowly.”

Aldin nodded as he carefully sat-up so as to not jiggle loose the tubes in his arm, and let the nurse wheel the tray up to him. He nibbled on the soft, near flavorless nuts slowly, one at a time. He lapped plenty of water with them, again draining the dish. After he was finished, he gnawed on the branch a while, using it to help clean his teeth as he gnawed. He was careful to ensure the bits landed on the tray. The nurse filled his dish a third time and he nearly drained it again.

“I didn’t think Dr. Hanter would know about this,” he said to the nurse as he finished gnawing, pointing to the much shorter branch with his tail. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” the nurse replied. “He had assistance from the two research professors from that college you’ve been working at. I can’t recall their names at the moment, the raccoon, and the small squirrel about your size. They explained about how your incisors constantly grow just like a wild cousin’s, so you need to constantly gnaw to keep them short. Do you want to go back to sleep or are you up for visitors? I think the squirrel professor is out there waiting.”

Aldin was intrigued and didn’t feel sleepy. “I’ve slept for six days, Nurse. I think I’ve slept enough for a while. I’ll take visitors.”

The otter nodded, went over to the door, and peaked out. "He's awake."

Dr. Gowandle came in and scampered over to his bedside. Her tail twitched nervously. The nurse provided her a cushion. "I'll be just outside if you need anything," he said just before leaving.

Aldin smiled. "Hello, Butternut."

She grabbed her tail in her nervousness. "Hello, Ambassador."

Aldin drooped his tail. "I prefer Aldin, unless you want me to call you Dr. Gowandle, or," he switched to chitterspeak, "'Granddame Elder'."

There was a look of relief on her muzzle and she nodded. "How are you feeling, Aldin?"

"Better than when I first woke up a couple days ago. I guess I literally slept off this cold." He chittered briefly, not really giggling, but trying to figure out what to say next. Finally, he continued. "I just had a pawful of pine nuts and three dishes of water. Maybe I will get something a little more solid later." Again he trailed off a moment. She nodded. He continued. "Dr. Hanter told me what you did for me. You saved my life. I can't thank you enough."

Again, she nodded.

Aldin sighed before continuing. "You left paw prints on the floor as you entered, Butternut," he pointed toward the wet marks with his tail. There was concern in his voice. "You, obviously, have been waiting to see me for some reason. And, you've had several chances now to speak up. I've slept for close to a week. I have little else to say to keep this conversation going. Leaving paw prints like that means you're afraid of something. What is it?"

"Almost everything," she blurted out hugging her tail and felt some relief that he broached the subject for her. She looked at him with pleading in her eyes. "Including how to bring this up with you. How is it you can remain so calm? The instincts are screaming at me to run away."

Aldin gigglechittered. "So, the Elder comes to a 'youngen' for wisdom." He paused at the offended look from her. "I mean no offense, Butternut. I'm just amused. How do I remain so calm? Good acting is part of it. It took me weeks to get use to people so much larger than me, who looked like giant versions of wild cousin predators back home, but none of which were out to make me their lunch. What helped me is that our people teach our pups coping techniques at a young age to hold back the wild cousin instincts. How familiar are you with my background?"

"I've reviewed your testimony before Parliament. I can't grasp being at war longer than you or I have been alive." She paused a moment, "And I can't imagine facing the Representative who

attacked you.” Despite hugging her tail, the tip wigwagged back and forth as she shuddered. “I would have lost all control and ran to the nearest door and scrabbled at it.”

Aldin shuddered. “I wanted him to attack me and in my fear as he leapt at me, I nearly killed him, Butternut.” He paused a moment. “That ‘predator’ and I have made-up since that initial encounter. As for the war back home, yes, unfortunately, that is how it is on my world. All must serve for a time as a scout for our human allies. They are BIG biggens, average of 2 mits in height. It’s a real test of those coping skills.

“I questioned those techniques when I first arrived here as they didn’t really prepare me to face what looked like giant predators to me. Humans are one thing. Wolves, foxes, and pine martins nearly double the size of wild cousin ones back home, is something else entirely. I had a hard time holding it together as a stranger in a strange world where the ‘biggens’ don’t talk a language you know and there are so many different ‘biggens’ here while we only have the one type on my world. Thank the Spirit that chitterspeak is apparently universal between our two worlds. Otherwise, it would have taken a lot longer to convey who I was.”

“And I’ve become so much more emotional since the change.” She paused while continuing to grasp her tail and looked down. After another bit of silence, she asked, “Could you teach me some of those ways you’ve learned to cope?”

“Look at me.” She glanced up and he smiled at her. “That is my first lesson to you. You need to keep an eye on what scares you. Otherwise, you can’t face down your fear. While I can help you cope with the instincts, I can’t help you with the emotions. You need a shrink for that.”

She looked blankly at him.

“Oh, right, sorry. Terran slang for,” now he paused. “Actually, I do not know the word in Common. You need to see someone who specializes with helping people with trouble inside their heads. I’m sure the enhanced instincts are part of the cause, but I’m not an expert on trouble inside the head.”

She nodded. “I think I know what you mean.”

He nodded in return. “Good. Once I am released, I will teach you what I can.” He pointed to her wedding band with his tail. “But it would be best if you, and I assume Raoul, learned together.”

“Why would you need to teach Raoul?”

“It is one thing for me to teach you, Butternut. But let’s suppose you encounter something and your instincts overwhelm you before you can use what you have learned? If I also teach him, he will have some idea of how to help you if/when you have such problems.”

She grasped his free paw, not the one with the tubes stuck in the arm, and gently squeezed it with hers. “Thank you.” A few tears trickled down her muzzle.

“It is the least I can do after what you did for me.”

“About that...” she trailed off a moment.