

NINETEEN

“About what?”

The fear began to overwhelm her again as her tail started to whip about before she could grab ahold of it again.

“What is wrong, Butternut?” There was concern in his voice. “Does this have to do with the transfusion that saved my life?”

(affirmativeflick)

“Is there some sort of taboo you broke by giving me some of your blood?”

(negativeflick)

“But, obviously, something is eating at you. Something you’re having a hard time explaining. Just let go of it. You have nothing to fear by having done that. Back on my world, blood is exchanged all the time due to battle wounds, though I was never a donor nor a...” he paused a moment trying to come-up with the word in Common.

“Recipient?”

“Yes. Prior to my arrival here, I never needed to donate nor be a recipient of blood.”

“It has to do with the traditions of the Region I came from,” she admitted.

“Oh?” Aldin gently prodded flicking his tail up, holding it in a brief curve and letting it drop.

Butternut blurted it out quickly before she lost the nerve again. “Dr. Hanter gave me some of your blood to trigger the antibodies in me. He then drew some of my blood to give to you. By tradition, one shares blood only with whom they have pledged to be mates.” She looked down in embarrassment and her tail wigwagged back and forth. Aldin remained silent until she looked up again.

“Remember what I said before about needing to face your fears.” He paused a moment. “You already have a mate,” he replied gently pointing to her bracelet with his tail. “How does Raoul feel about this?”

“Saving your life was most important to him. He said he’d share me with you if that’s what it would take.” Now the tears freely trickled down her muzzle.

“Come closer, Butternut.”

“Why?” now her body quivered in her despair.

“I think we both could use a hug right now. But be careful of the tubes.”

They embraced. “You must love him very much,” he whispered. He let her sob into his shoulder a while. Once she seemed to calm a bit, he gently released her. She sat back on the cushion next to his bed and wiped at her damp fur.

“I am not sure where to start, Butternut. For some reason I am not surprised. I have encountered some interesting traditions here. Of course, it is different among my people. As I told you back in the forest preserve, the female chooses the male. As I thought you were a wild cousin at the time, what I did not say is that she makes that choice after a courtship where the male has proven himself to her. They chase, couple, and from then on, they are mates. We do not exchange any kind of vows, nor shiny babbles.” He pointed again at the wedding band with his tail. He then looked her in the eyes. “I have not tried to court you, Butternut. We have not tried to get to know one another. And,” he carefully gestured with the tube-connected arm, “I am currently in no shape at the moment to chase you through the treetops if you feel I’m worthy.” He nervously gigglechattered briefly before continuing.

“However, we are not on Terra, nor are we in the Region you moved from. I understand that things are different here on this Earth and multiple mates do occasionally occur.” He paused and sighed a moment. “You do realize it is not like you would be leaving Raoul for me. You two would be inviting me to join you. I understand that. Once I am released, if you choose me, I would follow, and I would do my best to prove myself a worthy mate, though I would have a long way to go to be as worthy as Raoul seems to be. Based on your familiarity with each other when I brought you to his office, I am going to guess he had been waiting for you to return.

“I do not want to hurt either of you by coming in between you. And that would happen if I joined you right now. While you and he can’t have pups, you and I could. And I’m not ready to be a father right now, Butternut. More importantly, I don’t want to weaken the bond you and he obviously have for one another. I fear that could occur if I became your second mate at this time, tradition among your people dictating that or not. That is no way to repay you for saving my life.”

Again, he paused a moment with his tail lazily wigwagging back and forth while he was in thought.

“Maybe at some point in the future if both of you think it is still a good idea at that time, we can discuss it, but I would want to hear it from both of you. And before I would consider such an invitation, I would need to get to know both of you better than I do now and prove our worth to each other over such a commitment.”

He could see the burden lift off her shoulders as he finished. She got up and carefully reached for him to hug again.

“Thank you. You don’t know how much that means to me. Raoul said I didn’t have to fear you demanding to be my mate afterward. I just had to hear it for myself.”

Aldin replied in chitterspeak, “Curious, wise raccoon Elder.” That produced a gigglechitter out of Butternut.

(affirmativeflick) “Curious, wise Elder,” she responded in chitterspeak.

He switched back to Common as he reached for his nurse call button. “Now, I hate to shoo you off, Butternut, but I drank a lot of water before you came in, and now it wants out...” he trailed off.

She gigglechattered at his statement and nodded. “We’ll talk more later. Again, thank you. Thank you so very much,” she replied, letting herself out as the otter nurse answered his summons.