

TWENTY-TWO

Dr. Kaynobble looked up from the desk in his office as someone knocked on the door.

“Enter.”

Karl came in carrying a small box.

“We’ve got a problem, Dr. Kaynobble,” Karl stated flatly.

“Where’s Giguere?”

“I’ll get to him in a moment. You asked us to check-up on the couple the Ambassador played matchmaker with. The female’s body is in the box. When we arrived, the male practically jumped into the hovercraft crying out, ‘Granddame! Granddame! Where Granddame?’ as Giguere translated it the best he could. But rather than run away in panic when he didn’t see her with us, he turned to us and pleaded for help. He led us to their nest in a tree hollow and that’s where we found her body. Giguere explained as best I could we couldn’t help her, but we could take her body away. He asked if we were going to where Granddame was. We told him, yes. He leapt back into the hovercraft with us and pleaded to be taken to her.

“Giguere is with him now, trying to coax him around to the tree outside your window...”

“Where Granddame?” the wild squirrel asked yet again. He paused and sniffed around the base of the tree. “Granddame was here.”

Giguere did his best to remain patient with the wild cousin squirrel. “Yes, Granddame comes here a lot. We need to see biggen elder raccoon. He’ll call your Granddame.”

He pulled the caps off his nails turned claws, slipped the caps into a bag strapped to his waist, and began to climb the tree. The wild squirrel followed at first and then raced-up past him and paused on a branch about 10 mits up and near the partially open window to Dr. Kaynobble’s office.

“Biggen slow.”

“Yes, biggens not good climbers. Small biggen who trapped you teach me.” Giguere pointed to the open window. “Biggen elder in there.”

The wild squirrel sniffed around the branch. “Granddame was here.”

“Yes, we need to speak to biggen elder first. Come.”

Giguere made the leap clumsily and had to scrabble a little at the window ledge.

“Giguere is with him now, trying to coax him around to the tree outside your window...”

Both Karl and Dr. Kaynobble were startled by Giguere’s appearance and near miss at the window. Karl started to move towards the window to assist.

“No, I’ll be fine in a moment. The wild cousin is behind me.” Giguere pulled himself through pushing the window further open. The wild squirrel nimbly landed on the window ledge and started sniffing again. Before he could say anything, Giguere said to him in chitterspeak, “Yes, your granddame was here, too.”

Dr. Kaynobble hit an icon on his flatpanel. Butternut answered. He adjusted the camera to point at his guests. “You are needed in my office as soon as you’re available, Dr. Gowandle.” She ended the call without a reply. Giguere slowly moved over to be next to Karl.

“Thank you for opening your window, Dr. Kaynobble,” Giguere stated.

“I keep it open partway despite the chill as Dr. Gowandle finds that route more comfortable.” Dr. Kaynobble pulled some nuts out of the stash he kept in a drawer and set them on his desk and then turned toward his new guest. “Little one,” he spoke in chitterspeak, “I biggen elder. You granddame come soon. You safe.” He pointed to window. “If you afraid you know safety there.” He pointed to the nuts on his desk and poured some water in a dish. “You hungry? Come eat. You very brave come among biggens.”

The wild squirrel hesitated a moment and then leapt from the window sill to Dr. Kaynobble’s desk. He sniffed at the nuts and around them.

“Granddame was here.”

(affirmativeflick) “And she’ll be here soon.”

Within a ceclick of him reassuring the wild squirrel, Butternut appeared in the window and quickly covered the distance to the desk.

She and her adopted grandson sniffed each other. His eyes went wide and his tail started to wigwag rapidly. He glanced towards the window and took a couple of steps that way leaving wet paw prints on the desk top. Dr. Kaynobble kept still and with a glance of his eyes, his two graduate students did likewise.

There were tears in Butternut's eyes as her tail drooped. "Yes," she said in chitterspeak, "now grandpup know truth. I small biggen."

(nervouschatter)

"Night predator bird kill eat your granddame when your sire still pup. I raised him and his nestling mates."

His tail wigwagging decreased and he stopped backing away. "When fox hunt and eat dame and sire you raise me and nestling mates."

(affirmativeflick)

"Why?"

"Biggen elders know forest need more squirrels. You not my real grandpup. But I see you like grandpup. You trust me?"

He hesitated a moment. (affirmativeflick) "You raise me. You no harm me. I trust."

"No, I no harm you. Come. Eat. You safe. These biggens my friends. You asked them bring you to me. They have. I biggenspeak to biggens learn what they know." She turned to the two graduate students and switched to Common. "Have a seat. Fill me in."

They told her what Karl had told Dr. Kaynobble. She nodded. Through this, her adopted grandson stared.

"You ARE small biggen."

(affirmativeflick) "Yes, grandpup. I small biggen. Now, speak what cause your mate die."

"Two?" he held up two claws and she nodded. "Two days after you and other small biggen leave mate get sick. She hot like rock in sun. I no nest with her. I bring food. She no eat. I carry stream water in my mouth. Let drip on her. She drink then stop. Tell me flee. No want me get sick. She die. No pups." His tail drooped. Dr. Kaynobble translated for Karl. Giguere also appreciated the translation as his chitterspeak wasn't that great.

Butternut snuggled up to her adopted grandpup, hugging him like a young pup, and let him sob into her shoulder. "I sorry. You always like grandpup to me. Cry all you need to. You safe with me," she whispered as she shed a few tears of her own and gently stroked his backfur.

Dr. Kaynobble turned to the graduate students. “Karl, please take the body down to Biology. Have them do as thorough an exam as they can. See if they can determine the exact cause of death. I have my suspicions, but I want to hear what they find.”

“Right away,” Karl replied and left with the box.

“Giguere, I assume you’ve had the common squirrel cold as a child, correct?”

“If you mean the same one that nearly killed the Ambassador, yes.”

“Good. Otherwise, I’d have you report to the infirmary for observation.”

“Dr. Kaynobble, there’s more to this.” Giguere opened the small bag at his waist. He produced a small tranquilizer dart. “We found a few of these embedded in a tree near the nest and one on the ground half-buried in the snow. Karle has a couple in the box with the dead wild cousin for Biology to examine.”

“Grandpup safe,” Butternut chittered. “Biggen squirrel must give thing to raccoon elder.” She motioned to Giguere to reach over. He did so and handed the dart to Dr. Kaynobble. He examined it.

“Thank you, Giguere. Please pass my thanks onto Karle. You two went above and beyond what I asked today.”

Giguere bowed slightly not knowing what to say.

“Please head down to Biology. They may have questions you can answer.”

Giguere nodded and left.

“Raoul,” Butternut spoke in Common. “This is serious.”

“On more than one level, Butternut,” he replied. “We can discuss that later. Perhaps it’s time you introduced me to our grandson.”

She gigglechittered. “Of course.” She switched to chitterspeak. “Grandpup. Biggens can be strange.”

He slowly nodded.

“Biggens have names for each other as many, many biggens. It is faster than smelling all the time. Raccoon elder biggen name,” she switched to Common, “Raoul,” and back. “In chitterspeak, mean Curious. My biggen name, Butternut. Curious my mate.”

“I know. I smell him on you. Biggens strange. Why you mates? You no make pups.”

Butternut drooped her tail. “No, we no make pups. Biggens not always choose mate to make pups.”

“Biggens strange.”

Dr. Kaynobble did his best attempt at (affirmativeflick). “Yes, we can be. More food, little one?” He pulled out some more nuts and placed them on the desk in front of the wild squirrel.

As the wild squirrel ate, Dr. Kaynobble turned to his wife. In Common he said quietly, “We’ll need to determine what to do with him. Whether we have him settle in the trees on campus, or we take him back to the forest preserve.”

“That can wait, Raoul. He’s been through a lot. It’ll be up to him. He can stay with us tonight. I just wish we had thought sooner to check on him and his mate.” Butternut drooped her tail.