

TWENTY-FIVE

“And that is all I can teach you, Butternut. All you can do from here is practice it. The more you practice, the easier it will become.” Aldin looked first to her, then to Raoul, who nodded, and then glanced at the open window behind him. Just then the visitor chime sounded.

Butternut looked surprised. “Are you expecting anyone, Raoul?”

“Right on time,” Aldin stated. “I let Raoul know I was expecting company to drop by to help with your lessons.”

“I’m sorry to keep you in the dark, Love,” Raoul replied as he went to the door and let their guest in. “It is an honor for you to visit us, Chancellor.”

The middle-aged vixen who entered, bowed to her host. “I haven’t been Chancellor in over half a year, Dr. Kaynobble. Just call me Mara.”

“Then, you will call me Raoul. You know Aldin.”

Mara smiled as Aldin came up to her and she bent down for a heart-felt hug. “You continue to surprise me, Aldin,” she said to him. “What kind of trouble are you up to now?”

“I’m trying to help a friend overcome fears similar to those I faced when I first arrived here.”

While Aldin and Mara conversed, Butternut watched as her tail wigwagged. She slowly crept towards the open window, leaving wet paw prints. She recognized the fox from Aldin’s Parliament testimony. She seemed so large face-to-face. She did her best to remember what Aldin taught her despite the fear she felt.

“And that is why I’m here as you asked, Aldin.” Mara pulled back from the embrace with the smaller squirrel and smiled.

Butternut froze as Mara looked over toward her. Mara sat on an offered cushion and scooted down a little.

“My wife, Butternut,” Raoul introduced the two to each other. “Butternut, this is Mara, she served as our Region’s Representative and Chancellor two Parliaments ago when Aldin arrived here on Earth.”

Mara bowed where she sat. “I was also part of the team that investigated your accident. Unfortunately, we never determined what caused you to change. I’m truly sorry.”

“It’s...” Butternut hesitated and continued. “It’s okay, Mara. Please forgive me. This is hard for me.”

“I know and I’m sorry I’m the cause of your fear. I know it’s not against me personally. I also know it’s not as easy as it appears for my friend here either.” Mara pointed to light, quickly fading paw prints that Aldin had left. “Aldin asked me to drop by and offer you the chance to try. If you’re not ready, it’s nothing to feel bad about, Butternut. Aldin said you’ve watched all the video documentation around his arrival here. So, you know my background.”

“Yes.”

“Then you know how I feel about hunting.” Mara shuddered. “I can’t even start to imagine what you’ve gone through. It frightens me to try and put myself in your fur and how I’d react if suddenly I was transformed into a wild cousin fox. The drive/urge to hunt in order to survive and the constant distress over taking lives so I could live.” Again she shuddered. “I don’t think I could remain sane. In that respect, I think you’ve done better than I think I would if our roles were reversed...” Mara trailed off a moment. “Maybe that doesn’t help you, but I felt a need to say it.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.” Butternut breathed in and out a few times and did her best to center her inner mind. “I shall try. I must try. Even if I can’t go all the way this first time.”

“You’re not expected to go that far on a first meeting, Butternut,” Aldin tried to reassure her.

“Even sitting here this close to me is an accomplishment,” Mara gently added.

Butternut nodded and then took a couple of steps towards Mara and stopped as her tail started to wiggle uncontrollably. She closed her eyes to concentrate, shook her head, and opened them again. She quickly scampered forward to Mara, who opened her arms, surprised she was trying this right off. Butternut leapt and embraced the fox, sniffing at her fur as she did so.

“That’s right, don’t forget to tell yourself, ‘friend,’” Mara whispered. She could feel the small squirrel quiver in her embrace. Mara hugged gently not wanting her to feel trapped. As Butternut relaxed her embrace, Mara did likewise. Butternut took two steps back leaving wet paw prints. Her eyes were so wide the whites showed.

“I’m sorry,” she blurted out as she turned tail and ran, leaping out the window calling out “Predator! Danger!” in chitterspeak as she fled.

Mara raised an eyebrow as she watched, Aldin, who didn’t react to Butternut’s alarm cry. He reached up and pulled earbuds out of his ears to show her why.

“Please stay for dinner,” Raoul said. “Butternut should calm down in...”

“About 25 ceclicks or so if she’s anything like Aldin the first time,” Mara finished.

“I will give her 10 ceclicks to calm a bit and then I’ll go talk to her,” Aldin chimed in as he checked the earbuds in his ears and tapped an icon on his flatpanel, nodding in satisfaction. “She deserves some positive reinforcement. I did not think she would make it to within arm’s length of you on this first visit, Mara. I cannot thank you enough for offering to help.”