

TWENTY-SEVEN

(scratch, scratch)

“Enter Ambassador.”

Aldin entered, shutting the door behind him. “You asked me to see you in person, Dr. Kaynobble?” He noted that the raccoon wasn’t alone as he and a medium-sized woodchuck stood as he entered.

Dr. Kaynobble pointed to his other guest, “This is Fousette.”

The woodchuck held out a paw, which Aldin shook. “It’s a delight to finally meet you muzzle-to-muzzle, Ambassador.”

At a wave from Dr. Kaynobble, they all sat.

“Fousette is a producer at Edunetwork Channel 5. Our college has contracted with his network to produce a documentary on our wild cousin squirrel research. We’ll be working closely with his team over the spring and summer with a planned airing of the klick-long documentary in the fall. They will be using a lot of our recordings, but they may need to film some new footage.”

Aldin looked first to Fousette and then to Dr. Kaynobble. “Dr. Kaynobble, may I have a word with you alone, please? Please don’t take offence, Fousette. I wasn’t expecting this and,” Aldin paused a moment. “Well, the Terran phrase would be, I want to be on the same page before we discuss the plans for this documentary.

Fousette nodded and excused himself from the office.

“Is this a good idea at this time, Dr. Kaynobble?”

“What do you mean, Ambassador? And if you’re using my title with it being just the two of us, you must think this is serious.”

“I do. Serious enough not to bring it up in front of Fousette. Law enforcement still has no leads on who tried to sabotage your work and try and kill me a full month after the incident.”

“We shouldn’t let whoever is behind it stop us from sharing our research results with the world.”

Aldin nodded. “Yes, I guess you’re right. But is Earth ready for those results?”

“What do you mean?”

“Won’t this documentary show that wild cousin squirrels, at least those in the forest preserve near here, are smarter than many thought? Despite their limited language, they are just as self-aware as you and I.”

“Yes, I agree that they are, and I’m willing to risk my career to make sure others realize that.”

Aldin nodded. “Very well. Then, I am in and will cooperate fully with the film crew, even if they want to use some of the embarrassing footage involving me.”

“Great, thank you.”

“However, I’d suggest they take more time and move the air date back to next spring.”

Raoul nodded. “That’s a good idea. I’m sure once they start reviewing the footage we have, they’ll agree. Also, it would be better for Butternut.”

“How so?”

“Well, I guess we didn’t think to tell you before. The lottery chose her to be our Region’s Representative in the next Parliament, which starts in late summer and wraps-up mid-winter.”

A couple more ceklicks went by before Fousette returned. Dr. Kaynobble and Fousette spent the next klick going over the plans for the filming, occasionally asking for input from Aldin. He agreed to be filmed as needed for such things as demonstrating a wild cousin’s agility.

After the meeting finished and Fousette left, Dr. Kaynobble asked, “Will you join Butternut and I for dinner tonight?”

Aldin gigglechattered. “This would be the third time this week. If I did not know better, I would suspect you and she are trying hard to try and win me over.”

Raoul looked down a moment. “You are correct in regards to Butternut. It means everything to her.” He looked up and at Aldin. “She told me everything about your conversation with her back when you were still hospitalized. Despite your and my reassurances that you aren’t interested, she’s taking the rest of it to heart, Aldin. Especially, when you left the door open on the subject. She’s trying to win you over your way. As far as she’s concerned, she has no choice, but to try. He trailed off while fiddling with his wedding band.

Aldin stared at him. “You’re not serious?”

“Indeed, I am serious. Despite our reassurances, she feels obliged to try as you two have shared blood, which makes you two mates in her mind.”

“Spirit!” Aldin exclaimed and then sighed lost in thought for a moment. “If my people followed her people’s tradition, everyone in the colony would be related to everyone else by now.” He shook his head in disbelief. “And just how do you feel about this, Raoul?”

“I had asked her to make the blood donation to save your life. I love her deeply. I would do anything for her, including humoring her in this. Should we succeed, I would gladly call you my mate-brother, as that would make her happy.”

Aldin contemplated that a moment while lazily wigwagging his tail back and forth. “I hear the doubt in your voice, Raoul. It’s one thing to make your mate happy, but that’s not what I asked you. Deep down in your heart, how do you really feel about this?” Aldin stopped him from answering. “No, you don’t need to give me an answer to that, Raoul. Just think about it. You and she saved my life. Ruining your relationship with each other is not a good way to thank you. As I told her, I will tell you. I’m not ready for a relationship on that level at this time. It will take a lot more than dinner dates to get me to change my mind. And the invitation to join you two in such a relationship would need to be mutual on both your parts and not just you agreeing to it to make her happy. Your invitation to me to join you two as a third mate would have to come from your heart just as it would need to come from hers,” he paused a moment. “And not just because her people’s traditions dictate it. Along those lines, it would need to come from mine should I reach that point and ask you two. However, I will keep coming to dinner as often as you two invite me and I can fit it into my schedule. It’s the least I can do after what you’ve done for me.”

Raoul was silent for a moment, but he seemed to relax. “That’s fair. Will we see you at the normal time?”

Aldin nodded.

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“I find it interesting that wild cousin squirrels here, at least in the forest preserve, seem to mate for life much like my people choose to.” Aldin stated as he finished his meal.

“That’s an interesting change in topic,” Raoul responded as he swirled the last of the red wine in his glass. Aldin, as usual, had passed on the wine. Butternut had taken very little having rediscovered her wild cousin-size body couldn’t handle much alcohol. “And why do you find that interesting?”

Aldin sat back a bit on his cushion. “Well, back on Terra, wild cousin squirrels are somewhat like your wild cousin raccoons. They live alone and defend their territory from other wild cousin squirrels, except in really cold weather when they’ll tolerate others in their next to share warmth and during the mating season. Once a female accepts a certain male, they couple, true. But once the act is done, the female chases the male away from her territory. She might even couple with multiple males during the season, chasing each away in turn. She then raises her pups alone.”

“Yes, I agree that’s interesting how they are different between our world and yours...”