

WINTER ENCOUNTER by Aldin Busheytail

ONE

The hovercraft was nearing the end of its klick (hour) long trip from the university into the forest preserve. It was halfway through the local winter period or roughly Late January or early February if this was Terra instead of the other Earth. Aldin was still trying to get use to this Earth's different calendar of ten months of 35 days each versus the twelve months of 30 to 31 days each and that odd one with 28 days back on Terra. At the moment, it didn't really matter to him. What mattered was on this trip his task was to locate the butternuts he had buried the previous fall to demonstrate his memory skills and sense of smell and get filmed, well, digital recorded doing these tasks. The side bonus was he was going to get to keep those nuts. Well, at least those he didn't nibble on immediately. He was looking forward to this day as he had developed a fond taste for butternuts.

It had snowed the night before, which showed little sign of disturbance as the hovercraft passed over it. The vehicle finally slowed to a stop, and settled gently on top of the snow. The hovercraft's dome partially slid back to allow the door to open. Aldin leapt out. "I'm going to get a quick climb in and stretch my limbs while you set-up the equipment, Karle. I'll be back in 5 min...er...9 to 10 ceklicks." Aldin mentally kicked himself as he looked back to the skunk. After all this time, he should have been able to do the conversion to this world's time units without a problem. It was easier here once you got used to it, everything, including time was metric based. He looked to the larger squirrel, "Want to join me, Giguere?"

"I'll pass," he stated as he started to assist Karle unload gear from the hovercraft. "With two of us, it won't take as long to set-up."

"And I'd just be in the way being a small, wild cousin-size squirrel."

"We've been through this before, Ambassador. Go have your climb. Just go," Karle made shoeing motions with his hands.

Aldin was too excited to correct Karle, who kept insisting on using his title instead of his name. "Thanks!" He called out as he quickly raced up the nearest tree. The trees in the preserve were so huge compared to those back near the university. When he finally reached near the top, he looked down at the tiny specs the two graduate students had become. This tree had to be 80 mits (meters) or more in height. There was nothing this size back where he came from at Maine's Nahmakanta Public Reserve back on Terra to compare it to. He had read of huge trees out on the west coast of North America, but had never been there. Maybe these were like those. Though he doubted they could see him, he waved and then in one smooth motion, ran out on a branch, leapt, and easily cleared the distance to the next tree. He had no worry about a drop from that height, as deadly as it would be if somehow he missed. It was second nature to simply make the jump. The new branch sagged slightly under his landing, as expected, causing a little snow to slough off the

branch. This started a cascade of snow on its way to the forest floor. Karle and Giguere had to duck into the hovercraft to keep from getting hit by the dropping snow, not that it would have really harmed them as it was light, fluffy snow.

Aldin saw this from far above and gigglechittered even though he knew the two would probably be upset with him when he finished the climb down. They really needed to loosen-up a bit. He was starting to get Giguere to do so, but Karle was different. Oh well. It wasn't like he knew any smart skunks back on Terra before he had crossed over to this Earth. So who knows? Maybe Earth wild skunks here were naturally uptight. Aldin started down the second tree, muzzle-first, like any squirrel. As promised he was back within 10 ceclicks.

Aldin was handed a small combination earbud and microphone that slipped into his left ear. He attached a tiny camera on his back that looked over his shoulder. The Velcro-like underside stuck to his fur. It could also be easily removed without pulling the fur. There was a brief sight and sound check of the equipment. Karle started up a camera drone. This was a new one compared to what they had previously used. Aldin stared at it, cocking his head one way and then the other way.

"Maybe the headphone is messing with my hearing, Karle. I can't hear that drone. It's not like the one you used last fall. That one was as noisy as the ones we had on Terra."

Karle nodded. "No more angry, stinging insect noise. We got an upgrade from an older quadcopter to a hoverdrone."

Aldin stood there a moment staring at the drone and then looking around. "You did park the hovercraft in the same place as last fall, right?"

"Yes," Giguere replied. "We know that is important for you as a reference point in the nut search."

"Then something's not right. I know I buried a nut at this spot, but I don't smell anything. If there was still a nut below me, I should smell it. I've never asked how strong your sense of smell is, Giguere. For comparison, I can smell food through a third of a mit of soil and close to a mit of snow. There isn't that much snow on the ground." He shook his head a moment and then stuck his nose into the top layer of the snow sniffing and then looked up again. "I don't smell the butternut I stored here. Please, check the mapping software that marked where I buried nuts for confirmation that this is one of the spots." Aldin closed his eyes briefly in thought slowly wigwagging his tail back and forth. "I take back what I said before about a nut. If I remember correctly, I buried three here because the stems were stuck together."

Giguere looked to Karle who was already tapping away on his handheld flatpanel, this Earth's combination computer and communication/cellphone-like smart device about the same size as a

larger smart phone, but much more powerful. “He’s right, there should be 3 butternuts below him.”

“I’ll dig down and confirm they’re gone.” Aldin quickly went to work digging down through the snow with his forepaws until only part of his hind legs and tail remained above. His tail flicked about a bit before he resurfaced, shaking snow from his head and nose. In his mouth was part of a butternut shell, which he took into his paws to exam, holding it slightly to one side and then the other as directly in front of his nose was a natural blind spot. “No nuts, just shell fragments.” He scampered over to the hovercraft and handed it up for Giguere and Karle to examine. “You can see it was cracked open with incisors similar in size to mine.”

After examining the fragment, the two graduate students looked at each other and then at Aldin. The way they looked at him made him take step back.

“What?” (tailtwitch)

“Did you come back here on your own last fall?”

(negative flick) “Of course not. I know how important this research is. As tempted as I was to return and gather butternuts, I behaved. If I had had the time there are other places I could have gone to gather some to take home.”

“Well, let’s see if any of the other nearby nuts are still there,” Karle stated.

Spot after spot turned up nothing, except the occasional shell fragment. It was disheartening to Aldin. If it weren’t for Karle confirming each empty spot and those fragments, Aldin would have started to question his own memory. After half a klick, Karle called a stop to the search.

“It’s just as I feared,” Karle spoke. “Despite our best efforts to ensure this was an unclaimed territory, it has a wild cousin squirrel in it or had one sometime last fall after we did our filming.”

“Wouldn’t we have spotted it if it was here last fall?” Giguere questioned.

“With the noise the old drone made, never mind my antics having just gotten the cast off my arm at that time?” Aldin chimed in and shook his head negatively. “Not likely.” He paused a moment in thought before continuing. “Then again, I do not know the behavior of your wild cousin squirrels. I can only go on what I know from back on Terra where they avoided my kind. I think it is because we do not smell right to them. The noise of the old drone would have scared them away back home, also. But who knows how it is here, right?”

“So, this trip and all our work since last fall is a bust,” Giguere moaned.

Karle simply nodded in reply.

“You are going to give up just like that?” Aldin chided. “It snowed last night, and so far, the only small pawprints I have seen have been those I made. If there is still a wild cousin about, should not there be tracks between trees in a few spots? Perhaps you could send your new drone to scout around a little. See if you can find some tracks. That will not turn-up our lost nuts, but it would answer whether or not a wild cousin is still here.”

Karle agreed and started the drone on a survey pattern to look about in an outward spiral. Once it reached a distance of 250 mits, it would automatically return to the hovercraft.

“There are a couple more stashes I’d like to try, including a hollow a couple of trees over that way.” Aldin pointed to the east with his tail.

“Go ahead, but be careful.”

Aldin scampered off to the east and began climbing a tree. About 20 mits up, he reached the hollow. He sniffed around the entrance before poking his head in. An LED on his shoulder camera automatically turned on. Like all the other stashes he had searched, this one was empty. He drooped his tail in disappointment. He pulled his head out and clung there on the side of the tree for a moment his ears quivering. Yes, that was scrabbling he heard on the trunk above him and getting louder fast. Instinct made him scramble around the trunk just before he heard, “INTRUDER! GO! GO! GO! MINE!” barked loudly in chitterspeak by a wild cousin squirrel who was quickly on his tail. Down and around the trunk, Aldin scrambled rapidly with the other squirrel trying to nip at his tail.

“I leave! Not know you claim this territory!” he called back in chitterspeak as he fled down the trunk with the other close behind him. It kept up the same intruder-leave call as it chased him.

Aldin quickly reached the snow covered forest floor with the other squirrel still close on his tail. Before Karle and Giguere could react Aldin leapt into the hovercraft (chittering) back at the other squirrel. It leapt in behind him and skidded to a halt when it noticed the strange smells and saw the larger squirrel and skunk.

It screeched loudly in terror chirping its warning in chitterspeak, “BIGGENS! RUN!” It turned, scrabbling on the smooth floor of the hovercraft and leapt. It fled towards the nearest tree. “TRUCE! RUN! BIGGENS! DANGER!!! PREDATORS!!! RUN!!!” it barked rapidly as it fled.

The wild cousin’s call of predator and danger overwhelmed Aldin and his instincts won out. He, too, scrabbled out the hovercraft barking the same cry in chitterspeak, “PREDATORS! RUN!” He quickly followed the other up the tree while his two companions stared. Giguere’s tail swished about in warning from the cry, but he didn’t give into the call though he began to shake.

TWO

About 15 mits up, the wild cousin lay spread-out on a branch, staring down at the “biggens” and then nervously watched the intruder squirrel as it joined it. It gave out a small danger chirp as it sat out a ways on the branch.

Aldin kept his distance from the wild squirrel on a separate branch close by. He calmed first, but it was difficult as the other gave out a danger chirp every couple of ceklicks. He gazed at it seeing it was slightly smaller than him, grayish in color similar to his pelt, but with tasseled ears. Aldin spent the next 15 ceklicks occasionally looking at it and down at Karle and Giguere. The first couple of times, Aldin couldn’t resist and also chirped in danger. He did his best to get his instincts under control, but every time he was close to trying to say something, the other squirrel chirped again, causing his own tail to flash its warning. Internally, he was very frustrated. The next time Aldin glanced down, Karle was alone. *Where did Giguere go?*

The wild squirrel had finally started to calm down a bit. “Biggens no stay. Biggens leave. You leave,” it stated in chitterspeak, pointing to Aldin with its tail.

Aldin nodded slowly realizing the wild squirrel was female. He spoke slowly in chitterspeak as hers sounded strange to him. “I not know you claim this territory. This one leave with,” he hesitated briefly as he tried out the unfamiliar chitterspeak word, “biggens. Biggens my friends.” Aldin pointed to himself with his tail. “Biggens no hunt you.” He pointed his tail at the other squirrel.

She stared at him and his strange sounding chitterspeak, then glanced slightly downward and froze as her eyes widened enough for Aldin to see her whites.

“Hello Giguere,” Aldin stated in Common as he glanced down at the larger squirrel making his way towards the two of them. “Please back-off, I’ll be down soon.”

“Are you alright, Aldin?”

“I am for the moment, unless your arrival sets-off her danger cry again.”

“Her?”

(affirmativeflick) “Yes, this wild cousin is female.”

The wild squirrel stared as Aldin spoke to Giguere. “You speak biggen?”

(affirmativeflick)

“I caught part of that. But what was the last word she said?” Giguere asked.

“Just a moment, Giguere,” Aldin replied. He then turned to the wild squirrel. “I speak biggen. Biggen squirrel speak little chitterspeak. I speak both.” He pointed between them as she continued to stare. He turned back to Giguere switching to Common. “That last word is what she calls you and Karle, much as you refer to her as a wild cousin. After hearing it a few times, I think it’s whatever passes for local dialect in chitterspeak for ‘big one,’ which makes sense in a way. You are bigger.”

The wild squirrel’s tail started to wigwag again and she quietly chirped, “Danger.”

“No, you safe,” Aldin tried to reassure the wild squirrel. “Biggen not predator. Biggen my friend. Look at biggen. Biggen big squirrel. Squirrel no hunt squirrel.”

“We really should leave, Aldin,” Giguere stated in Common. “We shouldn’t disturb wild cousins. This one isn’t in the database as far as I know and if it...”

“She.”

“Yes, you said that before. Sorry. If she is, she was tagged somewhere else and not here. Karle is checking the equipment. She was close enough when she chased you into the hovercraft that we might have been able to get a reading if she is tagged.”

Aldin (gigglechittered) “Kind of too late to not disturb her. I will be along as quickly as I can. I need to make amends first if possible.” He turned back to the wild squirrel. “Biggen leave. I leave soon.”

Giguere nodded, turned around, and climbed back down the way he had come. Aldin was impressed with how far along Giguere’s climbing abilities had come. He was slow and cautious, but he had the technique right. He turned back to the wild squirrel. She was now staring at him. Her tail continued to wigwag in a danger warning.

“Biggen obey! You,” it added something Aldin didn’t understand. It continued to stare at him and took a couple backwards steps on the branch, continuing to wigwag her tail.

“I, what?” (curiousflick) “You fear me? Why? I no harm you.”

She repeated what she said before slowly. “You, seer.” (submissiveflick) “I no...” again she trailed off with something Aldin didn’t understand.

Seer?! Is that what she said? Spirit! I'm not making this worse instead of better, Aldin thought to himself. (negativeflick) "I no elder," Aldin countered as that word sounded similar to her seer and he didn't want to use the term she used. "I different. Hard explain." Aldin paused a moment. "I look like you." He pointed to himself and to her with his tail. "Up here," he pointed to his head, "like biggen. My people...different." He struggled for a moment for a way to explain as he could tell she didn't understand most of his words. "I small biggen. Come, smell, you see."

She hesitated and then slowly, very cautiously made her way to Aldin wigwagging her tail fearfully. He held still not wanting to startle her as she sniffed over him. She flinched away as she found the camera.

"Biggen thing."

"Yes. Hard explain. It no hurt you."

She cautiously moved over to him again and sniffed over the rest of him. When she was finished, she backed up a couple steps.

"Smell," she paused, "Smell squirrel and biggen." Her tail wagged about in confusion. "No right."

Aldin relaxed slightly not realizing he had been tense. "Yes, I different. I small biggen. I and biggens leave."

"No," she replied as she seemed to get over her initial fear. "No leave. You stay." She scooted back over sniffing him again. "You smell no right." She sniffed some more. "Squirrel and biggen," she chittered something rapidly he didn't understand. "You strong male." She (chitterpurred) and started to groom him. "Make strong pups." She wrapped her tail around him. "Pups speak biggen." She skittered past him to the trunk of the tree. "Biggens no hunt pups." Her tail tip caressed him under the chin and she took a couple of steps up the tree, looked back at him and flicked her tail.

SHIT!!! Aldin cursed to himself as his eyes shot wide. *Mid-Winter! Same time as back home! Spirit! What am I thinking being up here! And I invited her to inspect me!*

She chittered softly at him again, flicking her tail suggestively. He fought down the instincts she was drawing to the surface. He hoped the microphone was still working. "Karle, Giguere! I need help!" Aldin cried out as he turned his back on the wild squirrel and fled through the trees. She was quickly in hot pursuit.

THREE

Karle cursed as he watched what was happening from both Aldin's perspective and the drone. Apparently, the wild cousin hadn't noticed the drone. The drone kept up with the chase in the tree tops.

Giguere headed back towards the nearest tree.

"Don't go, Giguere," Karle called out. "They're way too nimble. You'll never keep up. Sooner or later, he'll flee toward us."

Giguere thrashed his tail about in frustration, but took Karle's advice.

"No pups!" Aldin chattered at the female chasing him. "I small biggen! Biggen elders no allow!"

Up and down, branch to branch, leaping, Aldin lead her around in a circle trying to work his way back to the hovercraft. She was quicker and more nimble than him. And he was at the disadvantage as this was her territory and she knew every branch and twig. It was obvious she could end this chase at any time she chose. The whole time he tried to reason with her. She, being a wild squirrel, didn't understand most of his chatter. It only seemed to encourage her more.

"Strange male! You chase me!" she cried out, passing him and now leading the chase. Aldin, quickly turned the other way and she turned about to chase after him again.

In his frenzy to get away, Aldin darted sideways on a branch and leapt. He didn't see the drone crossing his path until mid-leap, too late to avoid a collision. "SCREE!!!" He screamed just before impact, knocking off his shoulder-mounted camera. He scrabbled to hold onto the drone's smooth surface as it quickly descended with his added weight on it. He continued to scree out in panic the entire way to the ground. He and the drone landed hard, knocking the wind out of him, never mind whatever damage he may have inflicted on the drone buried in the snow beneath him. Before he could catch his breath, he was bowled over by the female.

She nuzzled him, doing all she could to win him over. "You chase me." She chittered softly in his ear, "make pups." Deep down a part of him wanted to give in. He was drowning in her scent. She had chosen him. Why should he resist her? Suddenly he was snapped out of the siren call of instinct as she chattered an alarm and wigwagged her tail in warning. However she remained entangled with him, obviously not willing to let go of her prize.

"Hello again, Giguere," Aldin called out, his voice muffled with the female's tail wrapped around his muzzle.

“It looks like you could use some help.”

“Yes, but do not get too close. She might attack you rather than run away.”

As if in agreement, she (chittergrowled). A sound that wasn't that intimidating to hear, but a clear warning. “Biggen leave! No hunt mate!”

“And if she runs away, I may not be able to resist any longer, follow and then...” he shuddered.

“No need to worry about me getting too close,” Giguere stated as he tapped an icon on his flatpanel. “Any closer and it would affect me too. I only got this close to ensure you were still close to the drone. I'm sorry to do this to you also, Ambassador.” Aldin heard gas emit from the drone below him. Before he could react, he quickly fell asleep, as did his 'mate' snuggled up to him.

FOUR

Aldin slowly awoke, feeling dizzy. He shook his head and looked about. He was in the hovercraft, laying on his designated cushion. The hovercraft wasn't moving. His mouth was very dry.

“How are you feeling? Did you enjoy your forced nap?” Giguere asked.

Aldin blinked a few times and shook his head again. “Sorry, after affects are still bothering me. What was that?”

“Something we use to temporarily knock out wild cousins so they can be tagged. Fortunately, you were almost sitting on the drone and it wasn't too badly damaged.”

Aldin slowly sat up and felt a wave of nausea. He sat very still while waiting for it to pass. “I'm a bit sore from the landing, but I think I'll be fine. Where is my 'mate'?” He held up a couple of claws on each hand and dangled them as he said mate.

“Karle is attending to her outside, waiting for her to come around, though it would be better for her not to see you or any of us when she awakens. Unfortunately, we can't take the chance some predator would come along before the gas wears off completely.”

Aldin slowly nodded. “Thank you.” He poured himself a little water and lapped it up. “That helps.”

“We’ve been able to get a reading on her epidermal tag. She was tagged last spring about 5 kamits (kilometers) north of here. It doesn’t make sense that she would travel this far for a new territory. It’s not like the area is overpopulated with wild cousins.”

“That does sound puzzling. While we never bothered to study the habits of our wild cousins back on Terra, I doubt any of them travelled that kind of distance.”

They both turned in startlement at a high pitched keening wail.

“Stay here, Ambassador,” Giguere stated as he went outside and over to Karle. The keening seemed to double.

“BIGGENS KILL! NOOOOO!!!!” The wild squirrel cried out and keened again.

Aldin couldn’t resist the call. He came forward next to the two larger graduate students.

The wild squirrel stared at him, but didn’t move towards him as he was too close to the biggens. “You no dead?!”

“Biggens make sleep. I wake. You wake. You safe.”

“No safe.” She shook herself all over trying to shake off the after effects of the gas. “Biggens no safe. Biggens hunt. Make sleep. Make male nestling sleep. I wake. Flee. Male nestling no wake. Predator kill. Eat. I flee,” she held up both front paws, “days. Biggens return. Hunt...”

“No.” Aldin interrupted. “We no hunt.” He pointed to himself, Karle and Giguere. “We leave. You safe.”

“Come, we flee biggens. Biggens no safe.”

Aldin turned to the two graduate students. “Please get down on your hands like a wild cousin.”

“What?” Karle asked.

“I want her to see you’re not that scary. She might come and sniff you.”

Karle rolled his eyes, but did as Aldin asked. Giguere did likewise.

Aldin turned to the wild squirrel. “Come. Biggens let you smell them. They no harm you.”

“Skunk no spray?”

Aldin translated for Karle. He replied, “As long as she doesn’t try to bite me.”

“You no bite, he no spray,” Aldin said to her.

She slowly and cautiously came over and sniffed both the graduate students. Karle looked annoyed while Giguere looked amused. When she was finished, Aldin beckoned her over to him.

“Now you smell me again. Slowly.”

He stood still as she did so. She chattered her teeth as her eyes widened.

“You, biggen squirrel, smell same.”

(affirmativeflick) “Yes. I small biggen. I sorry. Small biggen and squirrel no make pups. Biggen elders forbid.”

Her tail drooped as tears formed in her eyes. She quickly bit him on the left forearm, whipped around, and raced up the nearest tree and was quickly out of sight.

Aldin didn’t cry out from the sudden assault, partly because it happened so quickly. Giguere quickly pulled out the first aid kit to treat the wound, which wasn’t that serious or deep. Karle finally relaxed. Aldin hadn’t noticed how tense he was until he relaxed.

“Are you alright, Karle?”

Karle blinked a moment as he got up off his hands. “Yes. And you?”

“Minor bite. I guess she,” he paused a moment, “I’m not sure what the word is in Common. In English, it would be ‘divorced’ me, meaning when two mates break-up. She’s decided I’m no longer her mate.”

As Giguere put away the first aid kit, Karle nodded. “Can you tell me what you and she said?” he asked.

“There is no point hanging around here. We should get going. I will translate the whole event as you play it back on the hovercraft’s large flat panel as we head back to campus.”

FIVE

As promised, Aldin translated the entire encounter as it played on screen. When he got near the end where she had held up her front paws, he paused a moment as he held up his own paws and wiggled his clawed fingers. It didn’t take him long to figure out what she meant by holding up both paws.

“Your wild cousin squirrels are not as dumb as some may think. She may not have a lot of words, but she said a lot at the end with what little she has. Whoever gassed her and her brother, at least I think that’s what she meant by male nestling... anyway, whoever gassed them didn’t stick around until they were both recovered. As a result, her brother was killed by a passing predator. Seeing what happened, she said she fled for this many,” again, he wiggled his ten fingers, “days before settling in the territory we were experimenting in. As you and Giguere confirmed, according to her chip, she was tagged 5 kamits from here. I guess an Earth wild cousin squirrel can cover that distance in about 10 days.” Aldin paused for a moment. “I have got one question for you, Karle. You had a clear shot of her as she ran towards the tree. Why did you not spray her for biting me?”

Karle laughed as the small squirrel looked at him in puzzlement. “You don’t know? I couldn’t spray her if I wanted to. Unlike my wild cousins,” and now Karle held his fingers up in quotes like Aldin had earlier, “‘biggen’ skunks don’t have the required musk glands thanks to selective breeding over many generations a long time ago, which eliminated them.”

“So, when she was concerned about you spraying her, you were bluffing in the hopes a bluff would be enough.”

“Yes, Ambassador. Clearly she was afraid I would spray her, and clearly the bluff worked as she didn’t bite me. From her body language she was fearful as she sniffed me. I’m sorry it didn’t work that way for you.”

Aldin shrugged it off. “Well, it is not like I had threatened her if she bit me.”

They were all silent for a bit. Aldin started swishing his tail back and forth.

“You know, something about today’s encounter just does not add up,” he stated.

“What?” Giguere asked.

“Maybe it is my paranoid wild cousin side coming out. But there are a few too many coincidences here.” He held up his left forepaw in a loosely closed fist, palm up, and using a clawed finger from his right forepaw, he uncurled one clawed finger on the left paw. “One, all the wild cousins in the study area are tagged and tracked. So, someone should have noticed this one relocated to its new territory prior to this past fall.”

He uncurled a second clawed finger. “Two, we could have done today’s nut hunt earlier or later in the winter, but for some reason last fall, it was decided that today was designated as the date, half-way through winter, with the next couple of days as back-up in case of snowy weather. Back on Terra, that is mating season for wild cousins. Apparently, that is the same case here. I should have considered that when I was told when we would go hunt for the nuts. Then again, that

would not have worried me much at first, as there was not supposed to be any wild cousins in the area we chose. But if I had paid better attention to the date, I would have never asked Giguere to leave me alone with that wild cousin.”

He uncurled a third clawed finger while looking directly at Karle. “Three, we got a surprise equipment upgrade today. Our camera drone was swapped out for this trip. We had a noisy older-style quadcopter this past fall and a newer, faster silent hover one this time. Last fall’s noisy one was perfect to keep that wild cousin from protesting and chasing me off during the fall harvest. And today...” he trailed off.

“Today, by having a silent one, you and she could be recorded without scaring her,” Karle finished. “And if you had less willpower, she might be bearing your pups now. I can see where you’re going with this, Ambassador. Too many coincidences, alright. Someone set us up.”

“Or set you up,” Giguere added. They all stared at one another in disbelief. “Surely, not Dr. Kaynobble?” Giguere said in doubt. “He’s been doing this research too long to risk jeopardizing it on something like this.”

“If not him, then someone pretty high up under him. Someone who either wanted to capture wild cousins mating badly enough to not care about getting me in trouble.”

“Or someone who simply wanted to get you in trouble,” Karle chimed in. “It’s not like it was a unanimous decision when Parliament appointed you Ambassador for your people.”

Again, they were silent a moment as these thoughts sunk in.

Aldin broke the silence. “I ask that neither of you bring up these suspicions with anyone unless I ask you to.”

“Why? This is serious,” Karle interjected.

“Yes it is. However, you both are to graduate this spring, and I don’t want either of you to jeopardize your degree over this.”

“And if someone asks how today went?” Karle asked.

“Act as you would have before I raised suspicions. Talk in disgust how months and months of work were ruined and then laugh it up about how the Ambassador is a lady’s man, if need be. Tell the truth. I could not keep her off me. Giguere had to gas us to separate her from me.”

“That could be difficult to do.”

“I take it neither of you have ever acted in a school play? It is all I can suggest at this time. When we arrive back on campus, I am having a meeting with Dr. Kaynobble. We will quickly find out if he is involved.”

“We’ll go with you.”

“No, I need to have this meeting alone. Besides, there is equipment to put away, image recordings to upload, and I am sure you will find other things to do that graduate assistants are expected to do after a trip. Again, you need to act ‘normal’. And who knows, maybe the guilty party will give themselves away. In the meantime, as soon as we are in transmission range, upload today’s video recording, but lock it so only Dr. Kaynobble, you two, and I can access it.”

With that settled, for the rest of the return trip the two graduate students did some studying on their flat panels. Meanwhile, Aldin called up map data on the tagged wild cousins and made some mental notes. Sure enough, the female was clearly identified as living in the zone they had been assigned to gather nuts. How come the three of them didn’t receive that information when they were assigned that territory?

SIX

Aldin lightly scratched at the door as his claw scratching was louder than him knocking would be.

“Come-in, Ambassador. I wasn’t expecting you, but come-in.”

Aldin pushed the door open enough to scamper in, turned and shut it behind himself. He sat on a cushion and looked up at the raccoon behind the desk.

“Wonderful timing. I was about to open today’s video footage.”

“You may not like what you see, Dr. Kaynobble.” He sat quietly watching the raccoon’s body language as he watched what happened out in the forest preserve on his flatpanel. His tail thrashed back and forth in almost squirrel-like agitation. He had been studying wild cousin squirrels long enough that he didn’t need assistance understanding the rapid chitterspeak.

The raccoon finally looked up from his flatpanel and over at the small squirrel with disgust clearly written across his muzzle. He stood up and started to pace the room, suddenly stopped and stared at Aldin. “You weren’t even supposed to be out there today. I was expecting possible mating footage from a different group and not footage with you in it. At least you, somehow, resisted her.”

“Karle and Giguere kept level heads and were able to rescue me. I would not have been able to fight it much longer.”

“What were you doing out there today?”

Aldin tapped an icon on his flatpanel. “Exactly as I was instructed, Dr. Kaynobble”

Dr. Kaynobble looked at the instructions sent back to his flatpanel and scrolled back through them. “These aren’t right. Not at all. Here’s what I had assigned.” It was his turn to tap something on his flatpanel to send to Aldin’s. Aldin panned through them. The assigned territory was half a kamit further east and the follow-up date wasn’t for another two weeks. Aldin checked the time/date stamps between the two sets of assignments.

“Someone altered your instructions before they got to me. See here. 15 ceklicks different on the time/date stamp if I am reading this right.”

“That’s not a lot of time to perform this level of sabotage.”

“Unless someone planned it in advance.”

“Who would do that?”

“Obviously, someone who has access to your data. Have you made any enemies among your staff? Maybe upset a graduate student? Or perhaps someone does not like me.”

“And risk shutting down our project over it?! You have any idea what would have...”

“I quite clearly understand, Doctor,” Aldin cut-in. “Coupling with a wild animal is as much against the laws of my people as it is here, even when it is the wild animal that initiates the process. Even though I have got diplomatic immunity, an act like that and Parliament would quickly strip me of the job of Ambassador.” He used the English word for his title instead of the Common one. “Why do you think I fought against her attempts as best as I could?” Now Aldin started to pace back and forth. “You have any clue how hard it was for me? She **CHOSE** me! One does not easily say no when a female chooses you.”

“A little bit,” Dr. Kaynobble replied quietly. “Having studied wild cousin squirrels as long as I have, and thanks to your cooperation, I know you aren’t much different physically from them, just smarter with more mental capacity. You’re genetically compatible, amazingly, considering you’re from another world.”

Aldin paused at that. “Thank the Spirit, Giguere and Karle came to the rescue then.” He paused a moment trying to get back on his previous train of thought. “Obviously, I have most, if not all the same instincts. My kind have learned to suppress them to a point. But that only works for so

long. I was drowning in her scent and attention. Instinct was about to win when I was gassed.” Aldin paused in his own pacing a moment, shuddered while flicking his tail back and forth.

“Not to change subjects, Doctor, but there is one thing that has puzzled me through all of this since I first agreed to assist you. Please do not take this the wrong way.” He looked up at Dr. Kaynobble, “Why would a raccoon be so interested in researching wild cousin squirrels?”

Dr. Kaynobble chuckled. “No offense taken, Ambassador. I’m surprised it took you this long to ask that question.” He paused and sagged his shoulders a little. “There are very, very few wild cousin raccoons left in the world. They will probably die out in the next fifteen to twenty years. There’s not enough genetic diversity left among them for a viable population unless we were to capture all of them, move them into one place and carefully breed them. Wild cousin raccoons tend to be solitary creatures, so that wouldn’t work out too well. No one knows why their numbers have dwindled. Now wild cousin squirrel numbers are on the decline. But it’s not too late yet for them. That’s one of the reasons I chose to study them. I may not be able to save my wild cousins, but maybe I can save the squirrels.”

He stepped closer to Aldin. “And deep down,” he continued in a near whisper and paused a moment looking towards the door and then back at Aldin. “Deep, deep down I feel like I should have been born a squirrel and not a raccoon.”

Quietly, Aldin asked, “And this is not widely known, is it?”

“No.”

“Yet, you trust me with this, I assume, secret.”

He did his best imitation of an (affirmativeflick) with his ringed tail.

“And that sort of thing is frowned upon here?”

“It can be to some...” Dr. Kaynobble trailed off as he reached the same conclusion. “Someone knows who doesn’t like it.”

“Possibly. What better way to discredit you, your work, and the work of your students. As to who, as I said to Giguere and Karle, maybe they will let slip who they are soon. In the meantime, I need to borrow a hovercraft and some field equipment.”

“Why?”

Aldin explained what he believed he needed to do.

SEVEN

The klick-long trip back into the forest preserve seemed to take longer than that to Aldin. Probably, because he was travelling to a different part of the forest. Once the hovercraft settled into the snow, Aldin tapped a few icons on his flatpanel. He slipped an earbud into each ear, said a silent prayer to whatever Creator oversaw this Earth, and leapt out of the craft. He made for the nearest tree. Climbing up 30 mits quickly, he paused and listened. He then called out in chitterspeak.

“Is territory claimed?”

Again, he paused and listened. All was quiet. He made his way over a few more trees, pausing and calling as he went. Several more trees and calls later, finally, he heard a distant barked reply. “Leave! Mine!” He waited long enough to see the wild squirrel coming for him and led it on a chase back towards the hovercraft. If he hadn’t lost the last bit of his tail crossing over to this Earth, the wild squirrel would have nipped it. As hoped, it blindly chased him into the hovercraft, before sliding to a stop inside the strange space. Chittering in panic, it skidded on the floor of the craft making for the entryway. “BIGGEN THING! TRUCE! DANGER! RUN!” it chattered.

“Close.” Aldin commanded in Common, and watched the entry snap shut before the wild squirrel could escape. He kept his distance as the other cried out in panic scrabbling at the closed entrance. It tried leaping up at the clear dome and bounced off. The program Aldin had set-up in his flatpanel was working. The earbuds in his ears emitted tones that canceled the other’s danger calls, allowing Aldin to remain calm and not panic himself.

“TRAPPED! BIGGENS COME! HUNT US! MUST ESCAPE! FLEE!” It cried out.

Aldin reached to tap an icon on his flatpanel when something thumped against the outside of the hovercraft. He hesitated and then jumped back as another squirrel leapt up and bounced against the clear dome of the hovercraft. It scrambled while looking in at the other wild squirrel.

“NO! RUN! BIGGEN TRAP!” the one inside cried out.

Aldin tapped a couple of icons in quick succession. A portion of the dome quickly opened as the one outside was scrabbling at it. It tumbled in and the dome closed behind it. It quickly moved over to the other wild squirrel.

“Biggen trap! We die!” the first one cried out again. The newcomer’s tail started wigwagging in fear.

Aldin had enough. He didn’t want to try gassing them for fear it might also affect him. So, he tried a different approach as he whistled loudly. The other two paused in their panic and stared at him with fear in their eyes. The floor was wet with their paw prints. Now that they were holding

still, he could see both were similar to the other he ran from the day before, gray in pelt with tassled ears, which was good.

“You safe. Biggen no hunt,” he calmly said to them.

They continued to stare at him wigwagging their tails. Aldin could clearly see the newcomer was older then the male that he led into the hovercraft. He calmly looked back at them.

“You no scared? Why?” the older squirrel finally asked. Both continued wigwagging their tails. “Strange ears.”

Great, just great. She’s female, Aldin thought to himself, *and obviously not in the database which only listed the male here.*

“Hard tell. I come to you. You no bite, I no bite. You smell. Then you understand.”

Aldin slowly crept towards them. The older one hesitated and then crept forward, sniffed and its eyes shot wide. She turned to the other who cowered back. “Come smell.” It cautiously crept forward and sniffed and his eyes also shot wide.

Aldin crept back a few paces. “What you smell?”

“You no smell right. Smell like,” she paused.

“Like biggen and squirrel both,” finished the male.

“Yes. I no squirrel. My people different. Small biggen. Is why I have rounded ears.” He waved his tail over his head.

They both cowered back and started to chatter.

“Hush! You safe. I no harm you. I sorry I trap you.”

“Why small biggen trap?” the male asked.

Aldin thought long and hard how to explain in simple terms and wasn’t sure how.

“I trap you as you no listen while defend territory from me. I bring you to female. If she chose you, you sire pups. If no, I bring you back.” Aldin paused looking at the older female. “I no know you already have mate.”

The older female chittered quietly. “I no mate pup of pup.”

“Sire dame,” the male stated pointing to her with his tale. “Wise elder.”

“Ah,” Aldin quickly understanding. “My people chitterspeak,” he pointed to the male with his tail, “grandpup,” and pointing to the female, “granddame”.

“You no hunt?”

(negative flick) “No. Come, I share food.” Aldin opened a small backpack, tipped it over and spilled out some seeds similar to sunflower seeds. He nibbled one to show they were safe. He then opened a bottle and poured water in a dish. “I share water.”

He backed up a little to give them some personal space. They crept forward and inspected the seed and sniffed the water before lapping it and then nibbling on some of the seeds.

While they ate, Aldin explained his purpose. “Territory of female is far. Take all day climb through trees. This biggen ‘thing’ fly. Take us there in,” Aldin paused not sure how they tell time thinking a moment. He held up three clawed fingers sideways, pointing up at the sun with his tail. “In time sun move that far in sky. No want meet female, I let you go.” He switched to Common briefly. “Open.” The hovercraft door opened.

Both stared at him as he uttered the biggenspeak word and then both eyed the open doorway, but neither fled. It seemed the male was taking his cues from his grandmother. As she stayed put, he did likewise, but he kept eyeing the opening and wigwagging his tail.

“Small biggen strange,” the elder female finally stated. “Why you help...she struggled with the strange chitterspeak word, “grandpup find mate?”

“Female try choose me. Small biggen and squirrel no make pups. Biggen Elders no allow. If he go and she no choose him, I return him here. Go different territory, trap different male and try again. Biggen elders know forest need more squirrels.”

The elder nodded. “Biggen elders wise.”

“If you,” Aldin pointed to the male with his tail, “no want meet female, I release you.” He pointed to the open hovercraft door with his tail. “Stay or go.”

Both looked at the open doorway again and then back at Aldin. They moved close to one another and closer to the open doorway. They chattered quietly for a bit, occasionally glancing at the doorway and at Aldin.

Now the grandson crept forward. “Small biggen take me see female.” He too struggled with the new chitterspeak word. “Granddame elder come. Watch small biggen.”

“I no trust you,” she added.

“You bring us back?” the male asked again.

“If female no choose you.” (affirmative flick)

The elder female spoke to her grandson. “If female choose you, you stay. Help raise pups.”

“And you, Elder?” the male asked.

“Female allow me stay, I help raise pups. Female say no,” now she glared at Aldin. “Small biggen bring me back.”

“Yes, I promise,” Aldin replied crossing his heart using the tip of his tail. Both stared in puzzlement at him. “I take elder home if female no welcome.”

“I no trust you,” she added.

“You wise elder,” Aldin replied. “Last chance to leave. I must close door.” He waited a moment and neither attempted to leave. “Very well. Prepare. We fly.” Aldin tapped a few icons on his flatpanel as both stared at him using it. The door closed which jumped them. He pointed up to the dome with his tail. “Ledge up there, you watch us fly.”

They looked at him doubtfully, wigwagging their tails.

Aldin shifted his flatpanel onto his back where its Velcro-like backing made it easy to cling to his fur and leapt up on the sill surrounding the interior of the dome. “Come, watch.” He lightly tapped the plastic dome. “You no fall out.”

They followed him up.

“Begin flight,” Aldin spoke out in Common.

They both stared at him realizing he just used biggen speak again. Before they could say anything, the movement of the trees outside caught their attention.

“We fly. Small biggen no lie,” stated the male

“We fly fast! Bird predator fast!” the female added.

“No, we fly faster. Biggen flyer start slow and then go faster,” Aldin explained as the other two stared in wonder.

“Small biggen strange.”

“You know I small biggen. You no trust me, yet you stayed. You strange, too.”

They were silent the rest of the short 15 ceklick journey. Aldin thought to himself that this part was almost too easy.

EIGHT

The hovercraft settled in its “usual” spot in the snow.

“Come, we here,” Aldin said as he scampered over to the door. He looked back at the other two, who still kept a bit of distance from him. He turned to the door. “Open,” he commanded in Common and it slid open. He looked about, sniffing the air. Feeling it was safe, he leapt out and down into the snow. He took a couple of leaps and then looked back at the two wild squirrels who stayed inside.

“You no come?”

The elder female pointed to pawprints in the snow with her tail. “Biggens here.”

Aldin slipped into a combination of their simple chitterspeak and his expanded Terran chitterspeak hoping they’d understand enough of what he said. “Biggens here yesterday. No here today. Biggens my friends. We come yesterday. That’s when I met female. We no expect female here. We thought no one claim this territory.”

“Why you come?”

“Biggens know many things. Biggens forget many other things. I teach biggens how squirrels gather food and store food for winter. We come here fall harvest. I bury food. We come back yesterday so I can find food. But food all gone. Female moved it.”

The male leapt down and over to the prints and sniffed. “Small biggen speak true. Prints old.”

“I call female. I think she watch.” Aldin scampered over to the nearest tree and called out, “I, small biggen, return.” He paused, listened, and called again. Then he heard scrabbling from above.

The female paused on a branch about 5 mits up. “Why? You no chase. You no make pups. Leave!” She chattered a warning. “Or I bite!”

Aldin drooped his tale. “Yes, I no make pups. Biggen elders no allow. I leave soon. But...” he pointed towards the other male with his tale. “Maybe you and him...” he trailed off.

The two wild squirrels stared at each other. The female crept partway down the trunk to get a better look. “He no small biggen?”

“No small biggen. Squirrel like you. I trap him. Bring to you.”

“And other?” She pointed to the elder squirrel in the hovercraft.

“His granddame.” She looked at him funny. “Sire dame. Elder,” he added.

“I no choose?”

“I take back to their territory. Trap other male. Try again.”

“Why?”

“You want pups. I no make pups.”

“No. Why bring elder?”

“I trap male. She try to save her grandpup,” he paused, “pup of pup. So I trap her. I fear she hurt self if I no trap. I tell what I do. I let go. They choose come meet you.”

“Small biggen strange.”

“Yes,” the elder replied. “He strange. I no invade territory. I sit here, watch small biggen. No trust small biggen.” She twitched her tail.

“Elder wise,” the female replied.

Meanwhile, the male had crept over to the tree and had made part of the way up to her. He chattered quietly. She chattered back in invitation and they climbed back up to the same branch she had been on before. They began to sniff each other.

Aldin quietly scampered back towards the hovercraft and pulled the flatpanel off his back and tapped a few icons.

“What small biggen do? I no trust.”

“Elder, as I explained before, while biggens know many things, they forget others. They know little how squirrels live.” As he spoke a box in the hovercraft opened and a small spherical

hoverdrone rose out of it. The elder squirrel skittered back and quietly chattered wigwagging her tail in warning.

“No fear. Look.” He jumped up into the hovercraft and held his flatpanel around so she could see the image. She stared at herself staring at the flatpanel. He pointed to the drone behind him with his tail. “Biggen thing like eye. Let biggens far away see. Biggens learn. Biggens no disturb.”

“Predator night bird quiet,” she said.

“Yes, but no hunt. Just watch.”

The hoverdrone floated out of the hovercraft and rose up to the same level as the other two squirrels who were grooming each other.

“I think you may soon be a great granddame...” Aldin trailed off a moment. “Soon your grandpup sire pups.” As he finished the sentence, the female started to climb further up the tree, wigwagged her tail at the male and he followed. The chase sped up quickly. The drone followed. The elder watched the flatpanel totally mesmerized as Aldin held it out for her to watch.

After about 15 ceklicks, she finally looked away from the panel. “Grandson sire pups.” She chittered quietly and smiled at Aldin.

NINE

After another 15 ceklicks, Aldin asked the elder female, “Grandpup and mate forget we here?”

She (gigglechittered) quietly. “They rest. They chase again.” She paused a moment. “And again.” She looked sideways at him. “Small biggens different?”

Aldin drooped his tail. “In that way, my people like you, Elder. Female choose mate. I know little more. No female small biggen choose me before I come here.”

“How far you territory?”

“Small biggens different. We live in colony, shared territory. All help all. I no know how far to home colony. Not here.” He waived his tail around trying to encompass all around him.

She looked at him strangely.

“You no understand.”

She continued to look at him.

“At night you ever look at tiny white points in sky?”

(affirmative flick)

“You know what white points are?”

“I pup, Elder tell story. We die, change tiny white point. Live in sky.”

“That good story,” Aldin replied. “Tiny white points suns far, far away. My colony on world like this near one of those tiny white points. No know which one. I lost. Alone. Find here. I injured. Break arm,” he held up his left arm. Biggens find me. Biggens heal me. I help biggens in thanks. We now friends.”

The elder wild squirrel stared long and hard at him. He did not fidget under her stare. Finally, she spoke, “Small biggen strange. Strange story. You right. I no understand.” She held up her tail to stop him from replying. “You speak truth. I no understand.” She fell silent a moment and then requested, “Speak your home.”

“Trees less tall. Colony near lake. Hills surround lake. Colony territory cover forest as far as you climb in day and more. Plenty food. Different biggens. Bad, mean predators. Little fur. Greedy. Hunt each other. Some try hunt us. Others friends. Hard explain.”

“You pine home?”

“A little, Elder. I alone here. But here better. Biggens here not bad like home biggens. I no know how find colony now. If I knew, I tell other small biggens about here. Tell them move here.” Again he waved his tail about to try and imply the world in general and not this particular territory in the forest preserve. “Start new colony here.”

The elder wild squirrel simply nodded. “Speak biggens’ home.”

“Hard explain. Like my people’s Colony and not. Nothing to compare to that you understand, Elder.”

She nodded again as her grandson followed by the female descended a nearby tree.

“You leave.” The female said pointing to Aldin.

She turned to her mate’s grandmother. “I share food. Hope spring early.”

“No worry,” Aldin cut in. The female glared at him. “I give food. Then I leave.” He dragged out another backpack like the one he had opened earlier. “Biggen thing full of seed. I put in hollow two trees over. Then do again. Then leave.”

“I eat seed,” the elder added. “Good seed.”

“Why?” the younger female demanded.

“I took food from your territory at fall harvest. Not know you claim territory. Not right I take your food. I replace.”

“Small biggen strange. You leave food. You leave!” she chattered a warning at the end of the sentence.

“Yes. I leave after I leave food.” He wiggled into the backpack and quickly climbed the tree in question and emptied it in the hollow. He returned with the empty pack. Leapt back in the hovercraft, scooped-up the loose seed into the other pack, wiggled it on and did likewise.

While he was doing this, the elder turned to her granddaughter-in-law. “You mean. Small biggen help you. He alone. No other small biggens. He tell me.”

Once he was back down from his second trip, he saw the mated couple were up on a branch in a nearby tree.

“I leave now,” he said.

“I go with small biggen,” the elder announced.

“Why, Elder?” her grandpup asked.

“I see biggen territory. I leave, food last. When pups come, small biggen bring me back,” she looked at Aldin. It was obvious she wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

Aldin now stared at the elder and twitched his tail nervously. “Elder, not all biggens safe. Some are predators. Fox, wolf, bear.”

“They no hunt you?”

(affirmativeflick) “They no hunt me.”

“I stay with you, they no hunt me. Biggen hunt me, I bite biggen.” She chittergrowled, which sounded no more threatening than when her granddaughter-in-law had done likewise protecting Aldin the day before.

Aldin sighed. He resolved one issue only to get a new one. “Very well, Elder. Come. I no argue. You be scared.”

Aldin jumped up into the hovercraft and the elder followed him in. He pulled up its controls on his flatpanel. The door closed, it rose, and began the trek back to “biggen” territory.

TEN

Once they were out-of-site of the couple, he brought the hovercraft to a stop again.

“Why small biggen stop?”

“Must retrieve biggen eye thing,” he said as the hovercraft door opened. The drone entered and settled into its crate. He started the hovercraft up again and turned to the elder wild squirrel. “I must warn you, again, Elder. There are many, many biggens.”

“I stay with you, they no hunt me.”

“Yes, we speaked that. Elder wise. But, there are many, many biggens close together. You need name other than, Elder.”

“Name?”

“There are many, many biggens. Many squirrels, many raccoons, many foxes. They each have name to tell one another apart. Faster than sniffing all the time.” He pointed to himself with his tail. “My name is,” he switched to English, “Aldin.” He switched back to chitterspeak, “Name mean, Friend. Not all names have a meaning in chitterspeak.”

She stared at him a moment. “Small biggen name, Friend?” She flicked her tail back and forth a bit. “I take name,” she chattered something he didn’t understand.

He drooped his tail. “I no understand name,” he said as he opened up another pack within which he had his last few butternuts from the fall harvest and offered her one.

She gigglechattered as she accepted the nut. She repeated the name again and pointed to the butternut. “Silly, Friend, you no know this? I take name, Butternut.” She held the nut up again.

It was Aldin’s turn to learn a new word. He practiced it a couple times and smiled. His flatpanel beeped indicating an incoming call. Butternut looked warily at the device as Aldin slid it off his back.

“As I warned you, Butternut, biggens have many strange things that will scare you. But this one is very useful thing.” Aldin answered the call. At the other end was Dr. Kaynobble.

“I’m checking in, Ambassador. How did things go?”

“Success, sort of,” Aldin replied in Common as Butternut watched him.

“What do you mean?”

“My former ‘mate’ has a new mate and they have coupled.”

“Wonderful!”

“But...”

“But, what?”

Aldin slowly turned around so the flatpanel’s camera could see Butternut and she could see Dr. Kaynobble on the device. Aldin switched to chitterspeak. “I’ve got company as you can see. This is Butternut, a squirrel elder.” He glanced at Butternut. “This biggen thing also has eye thing. Raccoon is a biggen elder. He see us as we see him. In biggenspeak his name is,” Aldin switched briefly to Common, “Dr. Kaynobble.” He turned back to the camera. “I no know Biggen Elder name in chitterspeak.”

Thinking quickly, Dr. Kaynobble replied in rough chitterspeak, “Call me, Curious. Aldin, why is Butternut with you?”

“Elder Curious, I see Biggen territory,” she answered for him.

“And she no accept no for answer,” Aldin added.

Dr. Kaynobble did a good imitation of a gigglechitter. “I see. I prepare for visit. See you in three-tens,” he switched to common for the next word and then back to chitterspeak, “ceklicks, Aldin and Butternut.” The screen went dark.

Aldin spent the time on the trip trying to prepare Butternut for what she would see including that “biggens” walked on just their rear legs.

ELEVEN

As the hovercraft approached the university, Butternut was up on the 'ledge' next to the hovercraft's clear dome. She looked about with a combination of curiosity and fear, her tail twitching back and forth.

"Few, small trees. Large gaps. Many biggens," She whispered as her tail continued to wigwag back and forth.

"I did warn you."

She almost jumped having forgotten that Aldin was there with her, and had apparently overheard her whispered concerns. She looked down at him. "Yes," she drooped her tail. "I be brave."

"It can be hard. When I first come among biggens, I very, very scared." He paused. "Most biggens no chitterspeak. I learn biggenspeak. In biggenspeak your name is," he switched to Common and said her name. At her request, he repeated it a few times.

The hovercraft came to a stop next to a row of others like it and opened. Aldin jumped out and waited. Butternut hesitated, wigwagging her tail.

"Elder, you safe. Come. Follow."

She leapt down next to him. He led the way into one of the buildings and she stuck close behind him, but froze as the door closed behind them.

(nervouschitter) "Trap!"

Aldin sighed. "No, Butternut, watch." Aldin scampered back towards the door, tripping a sensor and it opened. He stepped back and it closed. "You safe. You get close, it open. Come." He turned around and led her down a corridor and then up a flight of stairs. Fortunately, they didn't encounter any students along the way. Aldin paused in front of Dr. Kaynobble's office door and scratched.

"Come in, Aldin and Butternut," Dr. Kaynobble chattered out.

Aldin pushed the door open enough to slip in. He waited for Butternut who hesitated, but followed.

"I close door," Aldin warned her.

"You safe," Dr. Kaynobble, who had gotten down on his hands, stated and pointed to an open window with his tail. "Tree out there if you no feel safe."

Butternut scampered over to the window, leapt up on the ledge, looked out, and, nodded. She turned around and quickly leapt straight to Dr. Kaynobble, clearing the slightly over one mit distance with ease. Dr. Kaynobble barely sat-up in time to catch her in his embrace. She nuzzled his fur as she hugged him. He gently stroked her back fur while they embraced.

“I so missed you, Raoul,” she exclaimed in Common before disengaging though her speech was a little slurred. “My speech may be a bit rusty,” she stated still slurring a bit, “but it’s good to be back. How long has it been? I’ve lost track.”

“You’ve been living in the forest preserve for about six years, ‘Butternut,’” he replied in Common. “I’m glad to see you haven’t gone completely wild cousin on me.”

Aldin stared at both of them.

Butternut (gigglechittered). “Actually, I had nearly gone completely wild cousin.” She drooped her tail briefly and then pointed it at Aldin. “Then he arrived. As soon as he spoke in ‘biggenspeak,’ it all started to quickly come back. It was,” she paused flicking her tail back and forth a moment in thought, “difficult to keep the wild cousin facade up on the ride back, especially after you called him. It is also,” she paused a moment as her tail continued to wigwag, “difficult to suppress the wild cousin fears after living that way for so long. I know neither of you are no danger to me, but part of me wants to leap out that window, and up the tree screeching a warning to others.” She shuddered. “It’s hard, just as my escort here warned me. I’m embarrassed that the automatic door closing behind us as we entered the building scared me as much as it did.”

“I should not be so surprised,” Aldin responded. “You stopped leaving wet paw prints as soon as I agreed to bring you to see how ‘Biggens’ live. Your chitterspeak was better than the others, and you picked-up on new words quickly with little need for comparison to understand what they were for.”

“Aldin,” Dr. Kaynobble pointed to Butternut, “this is Dr. Gowandle. She used to be a ‘Biggen’ squirrel,” he paused, “and we were very close to one another.”

“There was an accident in my lab. I was an organic chemistry professor back then. I physically regressed into a wild cousin, complete with the full instincts, yet I kept my ‘biggen’ mind intact. After the accident I went into undercover wild cousin research, which simply made sense at that moment. At the time I moved into the forest preserve, the cause of my accident had yet to be determined.” She looked him over. “Apparently, someone ignored safety protocols and, I assume, you’re the victim of a similar accident. I’m so sorry.” She drooped her tail.

“No, that’s not the case, Dr. Gowandle,” Dr. Kaynobble briefly paused. “Or do you want to now be called Butternut?”

She flicked her tail back and forth in thought a moment. “I, actually, like Butternut for some reason, Raoul. It feels more fitting to my current form than my birth name. But let’s keep that for when we’re not in front of students.” She glanced over at Aldin.

He chuckled and then continued. “Butternut, this is not one of my students. Technically, you could call him a special assistant, I suppose. This is Al-den Bush-E-tail the Younger, Ambassador of the Nah-mah-can’t-ah Free Squirrels of the planet Terra.” He struggled a bit with the English parts. He paused a moment and then clarified. “The term, Ambassador, is from his people. It is the title for a Representative of a local government that is not part of the world government. Though his people aren’t local, as the representative from another world, it still fits him.”

Aldin bowed with a smirk on his muzzle as he said in English and repeated in both chitterspeak and Common, “I am delighted to meet you, Butternut.”

Butternut’s tail wigwagged back and forth rapidly in a corkscrew as she leapt up on the windowsill and chattered quietly trying to fight down the fear instincts that suddenly welled up from the surprising news. “You weren’t making that up back in the hovercraft?”

(negative flick) “No, I tried to explain it the best I could in terms that a wild cousin might understand. My people’s chitterspeak is more extensive than that spoken by your wild cousins.”

“So I noticed as I struggled to grasp a lot of what you said.” She slowly worked her way back down off the windowsill though her tail continued to fearfully wigwag.

“And our ‘biggenspeak’ is called English. In old English, my name, Aldin, does mean Friend. However, I may not be from another planet in your galaxy. Terra could be an Earth in a parallel dimension. Who knows?” Aldin shrugged. “It would explain one thing your scientists, including Dr. Kaynobble, have confirmed.”

“And that is?”

“Genetically, he’s compatible with the local wild cousin population,” Dr. Kaynobble responded. “Even though he lacks the ear tufts found in our local wild cousins.”

Dr. Gowandle cursed quietly in disbelief while shaking her head. “I’m out playing wild cousin for six years, raising orphans along the way, and I miss out on the greatest biological discovery of our lifetime. How?” she hesitated and asked again, “How did...” and paused again in hesitation.

Dr. Kaynobble poured them some herbal tea, and laid out a tray of unsalted seeds and nuts as Aldin gave her the brief version. She only jumped a little at Dr. Kaynobble’s sudden movement.

She just shook her head in a combination of disbelief and wonder as Aldin finished, and then yawned.

“We need to talk more, but not right now,” she struggled with his title, “Embassador.” She paused again. “Right now what I would really like is a warm bath and then get some rest. It’s one of the things I missed out there.” She paused a moment, “And I think that explains something about you, Embassador.”

“Oh?” He raised his tail straight-up and briefly curled the top in a half-circle (curiousflick).

“When you invited my grandson and me to sniff you,” she paused at the look on Raoul’s muzzle. “Relax, Raoul, he’s adopted. As I mentioned earlier, while out there, I raised a few litters of orphans. It’ll all be in my report.” She turned back to Aldin, “As I was saying, when we sniffed you, you smelled just like a wild cousin, except, thinking about it now, you’re too clean, much like a ‘biggen’ smells.” She gigglechittered a moment. “There’s an undercurrent of soap for lack of a better way to describe it. Maybe that’s why my new granddaughter-in-law tried to choose you anyway. Maybe she just thought you had been trapped briefly by the ‘biggens’ and had been trying to escape when she met you and that undercurrent she smelled was due to them handling you.” She shrugged. “Who knows? Anyway, we can discuss this later.”

Dr. Kaynobble nodded. “You may bathe and stay at my place as I know you currently don’t have a place, Butternut.”

“Yes, that would be good. Thank you, Raoul.” She hesitated a moment looking at Aldin. “I hope we will talk more, later, Embassador. It’s been good to meet and learn about you. Thank you for transporting me back.”

TWELVE

Butternut stepped out of Raoul’s bathroom with an oversized-to-her towel wrapped around her damp body. She scampered over next to him, dragging part of the towel behind her to where he lay sprawled on a large cushion in front of his entertainment panel, which was off at the moment.

“Oh, Raoul, you don’t know how good it felt to just soak,” she exclaimed and chittered softly. “For the past six years I’ve had to settle for tongue baths. Doing that was so nasty at first, but I got used to it. From the color of the water, it definitely wasn’t as effective, though. I can’t thank you enough.”

She fluffed up her damp fur with the towel and picked-up a child’s brush and started to brush out her fur. She chitterpurred to herself as she worked out a few tiny mats in her pelt. It felt so good to properly brush her fur for the first time in years. “I regret losing the brush I took with me. Using one’s claws and teeth isn’t the same, I’ll tell you.”

As she prattled along, Raoul remained silent, though he watched her. She drooped her tail at his continued silence.

“You haven’t said much since we arrived. What’s wrong?”

He sighed deeply as he sat-up slowly so as to not startle her. “What’s wrong? After the accident, you ran away on me. I’m upset and I shouldn’t be, I know part of it was the overwhelming wild cousin instincts. You needed time to sort things out and I understand that. You’ve returned, yet, I’m still upset.”

“Oh, Raoul,” she drooped her tail, “I was so scared.”

“I was willing to face the unknown with you.”

“You didn’t ask. And then after the accident, we would have been constantly harassed if you had. I wasn’t ready for that yet. The instincts were always there as you know. It’s just, somehow, ‘biggens’ have learned to mostly keep them under control. But after my change they’re a lot closer to the surface now. It’s not as easy to ignore them. I needed to sort things out. I couldn’t put you through that.”

“Six years I’ve waited for you to return, Butternut. How is now any different than six years ago?”

“Yes, I know. That wasn’t part of the plan. I figured a year, maybe two. But every time I saw graduate students, they were in gas first and ask questions later mode. I had no interest in getting tagged.” She looked down. “I was truly afraid of them, Raoul. And I didn’t want to explain myself to any of them who were unaware of the accident. You could have come to get me.

Raoul sighed. “I thought about that many times. In the end you chose to go out there, so, in my mind, it had to be your choice on your own to return without my influence.

“When the Ambassador showed-up today calling himself a ‘small biggen,’ I saw my chance to come home. I was also afraid of him, but it was easier to get over my fears in his presence, probably because he is the same size as me. I just don’t understand how he could remain so calm while my grandson and I were scrabbling at the hovercraft door chittering in sheer terror and panic.”

“That part is easy and I’m glad it worked. He had earbuds in his ears programmed to drown-out any alarm chitterspeak.” Raoul replied and flopped back down on his cushion. “When he suggested we start playing matchmaker, I was going to say no until he stated which male he was going to try and catch. I knew it was roughly in the territory you last were living in.” He sighed deeply. “But, the way you eyed him in the office.”

(gigglechitter) “Is my squirrel-at-heart jealous of an alien squirrel?” She paused. “Why would I openly show my affection for you in front of him if I was interested in him? He’s quite handsome for an exotic wild cousin-like squirrel, even with those short, rounded ears.” She smiled at him. “But there’s definitely no spark there. And before you ask, I did not ‘chose’ any wild cousins for mates while living in the forest preserve. Some tried in vain to win me, but,” (shudderflick) “I wasn’t about to bear pups for a wild cousin. In my time out there, I adopted and raised three litters of just weened orphans, but I never bore pups of my own. Getting back to your other question, if people are accepting of the Ambassador, then maybe it wouldn’t be so hard a time as I feared six years ago for us.”

She yawned, put the brush down, and snuggled up next to him on the largish cushion. “I so missed you, Raoul.” She whispered as she nuzzled his fur a little, “I wish we were compatible.” She switched to chitterspeak, “carry your pups if could,” she finished as she quickly drifted off to sleep. Raoul lay there a while with a lot of emotions racing through his head. After a while he, too, succumbed to sleep, not wanting to risk disturbing her by getting up to go into his bedroom.

THIRTEEN

Butternut spent the entire following day dictating the beginning of her field notes from memory into a flatpanel. Much to her frustration, she quickly rediscovered how easily she could scratch-up the surface of a flatpanel with her claws. She had forgotten about that. Late afternoon, she decided it was time to take a break and work on dinner. She was amazed at the counters in Raoul’s kitchen. At a touch of an icon on the flatpanel, they adjust down in height comfortable for her to work at. She wondered when he had those installed.

But then, she had a small problem. It had been so long since she had been in a kitchen she wasn’t sure what to do or make. She knew Raoul would want more than some nuts and berries, which sounded appealing to her. She opened the cooler unit to see what he had for food. Her flatpanel chirped. Opening the cooler triggered a delayed message from Raoul with some simple suggestions that would work for both of them. She had just enough time to prepare salads for the two of them before he came home from the university. They made small talk for a while. Eventually, their relationship in the past came back to the surface.

“I was going to propose to you the day of the accident,” Raoul finally confessed. “While you were recovering, I returned the wedding band I had purchased...”

Tears welled in her eyes as her tail drooped. “And after the past day-and-a-half, I realize how much I still love you, despite that there is no way we could now...” she choked up.

Raoul scooped her up and hugged her close. “It’s alright,” he whispered to her while gently stroking her back fur as she had always loved before the accident. “I understand, Butternut. It’s

my own fault. I was always too afraid to make the first move. And then the accident occurred. Hush...sssshhhh." He continued to embrace and rock her as she sobbed into his shoulder, wrapping her tail partially around him. "Let me finish. Never say never."

He reached over into a cabinet with his free hand and pulled a small box out. "I returned the wedding band in exchange for one that would fit the new you." He pulled the small wedding band out. "But you departed for the forest before I could propose. I would still have you after all this time, if you would have me."

"Really?" she muffled out and looked at him eye-to-eye.

"If I recall, there is a tradition among the people of your region," he continued as he gently pulling part of her left forepaw off his chest and nicked the palm of his hand with one of her little sharp claws. Her eyes widened. Without hesitation, she nicked her own forepaw.

In near unison they said to one another, "With no hesitation, regardless of what we may face, I pledge myself to you, Butternut/Raoul. Mate until death we part." They intermingled their blood and then licked each other's wounds. She clung tightly to him and cried, but now they were tears of joy. They kissed. She slipped the band around her left wrist. He pulled a similar one out and slipped it over his own.

"We still need to find some witnesses and repeat our vows to make it official," she said.

"That can wait, love," Raoul replied, leading her to the door and a waiting hovercraft. "We've covered a tradition of your people. Now we should cover one from mine." He winked at her.

Three clicks later, well past local sunset, the hovercraft settled again in front of their home. Both giggled like children as they tumbled out of hovercraft in each other's embrace. There were twigs in their fur. If anyone had happened by at that time, they would have politely ignored the two as they reentered their home.

"I didn't think you would ever be able to keep up," she gigglechittered. "My squirrel-wanna-be makes a pretty good squirrel."

"My wild cousins are nearly as good at climbing as squirrels, and I've been practicing. Alas, we raccoons can't run straight down a trunk, love, as you quickly found out. Thank you for choosing branches that would hold-up under my larger body."

He led her to the bathroom, where they bathed together picking the twigs out of each other's fur. They towed off, brushed each other's fur, and soon after, they fell asleep in each other's embrace on their bed as if six years without each other hadn't passed by.

FOURTEEN

The following morning, they awoke to Raoul's flatpanel chirping with an incoming call. Raoul answered it and stared a moment at the brown pelted squirrel on his screen trying to recall her name. Butternut remained snuggled to him, but off screen.

"Aouphril, right? If I remember, you graduated last year. You and your mate have graciously hosted the Ambassador ever since."

"Yes, Dr. Kaynobble, that is correct," she answered with a bit of distress in her voice. "I'm calling because of the Ambassador. He won't be in today. He was just rushed to the clinic and they're transferring him to Hofstrah Medical University."

"What happened?" he asked. Butternut looked towards him with concern written across her muzzle for the alien squirrel.

"He complained about not feeling well last night and went to sleep early. This morning, he wouldn't stir and was very hot to the touch. High fever. Our household is under quarantine just in case."

"Thank you, Aouphril. I'll check in on him."

Aouphril showed relief on her muzzle. "Thank you. He's become a real close friend to Orlan and me." She ended the call.

"Best we both go over there. I suspect he caught whatever it is from our granddaughter-in-law." Butternut looked quizzically at him, so he continued. "When he had refused to couple with her, she bit him."

Butternut did her best to suppress a gigglechitter at what had occurred. "I bit more than my share of would-be courtiers out there, Raoul." She moved over to him and gently nibbled his ear. "But I'd never bite you that way unless you wanted me to." Again she gigglechattered and winked at him as she scampered out of their bed and into the bathroom.

Half a klick later, they were at the hospital and inquiring about Aldin. Some stared at Butternut as her accident hadn't been highly publicized. The matching wedding bands on her and Raoul's left arms also raised eyebrows. She left paw prints as she struggled to fight down the instinct to flee from all the "biggens" they passed by. It was harder coming back than she thought it would be. She tried her best to walk on just her hind legs in order to try and blend in, but it was difficult as a wild cousin's body wasn't designed to do so. They arrived in a waiting room. Soon, Dr.

Hanter hopped into the room, escorted by a younger hedgehog. The hedgehog immediately went over to Butternut.

“Dr. Gowandle? You’re back?” he exclaimed. “We should get you in an exam room right away.”

“This is the individual you were talking about, Dr. Territin, when discussing my patient?”

“Yes. As you can see, Dr. Gowandle, is physically a wild cousin.”

“I wasn’t originally this size, Doctor...”

“Hanter.” The elder bunny doctor replied. “I’m the Ambassador’s physician.”

She nodded. “Long story involving a lab accident that turned me physically into a wild cousin six years ago. I just met the Ambassador two days ago.”

“Do you have a head cold or recently suffered from one?”

(negative flick) “No. I feel just fine,” she replied, glancing back at her mate.

“We suspect a wild cousin she knows,” Dr. Kaynobble interjected, “who bit the Ambassador three days ago, gave him whatever it is that’s making him sick.”

“I still need to examine you to make sure,” Dr. Territin insisted and led her to another room.

“He was bitten?” Dr. Hanter asked.

“Yes. Here, watch.” Dr. Kaynobble called up the footage on his flatpanel.

“Yes, he does have a small scabbed-over wound on his left forearm. Is there any way you could trap that wild cousin?”

Dr. Kaynobble sighed. “Not easily, though she is Dr. Gowandle’s new granddaughter-in-law,” and he raised his left arm indicating his wedding band, “which makes her mine, too.”

Dr. Hanter’s ears shot straight up in alarm.

Realizing what he had just said, Dr. Kaynobble clarified. “She spent the last six years living among wild cousins, studying them up close as she could pass for one. About three years back she raised a litter of orphans after their mother had been killed by an owl. When they reached adulthood, one of them stayed in her territory, found a mate, and they had a litter, only for both to be killed by predators. I think she said it was a wild cousin fox that time. So, once again, she

raised the resulting orphans. As far as those wild cousin squirrels knew, she was their 'sire dame' or as we would say, grandmother."

Dr. Hanter relaxed and his flatpanel chirped. He poked an icon, read some text and looked-up.

"The Ambassador's blood tests are in." He read through the results. "He's suffering from what we consider a common cold. And he hasn't got any immunity against it."

"And because it's 'common', there's no vaccine, correct?"

"Even if we could develop one now, it wouldn't help him at this stage."

"How long has he got?"

Dr. Hanter drooped his ears a bit. "Unless he starts to turn around soon, maybe a few days."

50 cekklicks went by. Dr. Territin returned with Dr. Gowandle. "She's perfectly fit and healthy," he said to Dr. Hanter. There was a brief knowing glance between the hedgehog and his patient.

"Blood tests?"

"It'll be at least half a klick before I hear back. How's your patient?"

"As I just informed Dr. Kaynobble, he's got a few days at most." He filled them in.

Dr. Gowandle drooped her tail. "As what he has isn't dangerous to us, can we see him?"

"Of course. This way."

"We should also inform his hosts," Dr. Kaynobble added. "If this is a common cold, they don't need to be under quarantine any longer, right?"

"Yes, of course," Dr. Hanter replied. "I'll release them from quarantine immediately. But I only want my patient to have two visitors at a time."

FIFTEEN

Aophril and Orlan rushed into the waiting room. Tears were trickling down her muzzle.

"We just came out," Dr. Kaynobble stated, "so you two can go in. Don't be startled when you go in. They've got him mostly submerged in an ice water bath to try and keep his fever down. He's unconscious, but your presence may help him."

The two squirrels left the waiting room, neither seemed to register Butternut's presence. Dr. Territin entered. "Dr. Gowandle, may I speak with you a moment?"

"Anything you need to say to me, Dr. Territin, can be spoken in front of my husband. We have pledged ourselves to one another, but haven't had a moment yet to gather three witnesses to make it legal as we came straight here on the news of the Ambassador's condition."

"Very well," the hedgehog replied, turning to Dr. Kaynobble. "First, if your mate hasn't had a moment to tell you yet, Dr. Kaynobble, the two of you need to be careful when you choose to couple due to your size difference. Otherwise, you could seriously injure her internally." The raccoon blushed under his fur at the chiding.

"But that's a separate issue. I came in here to discuss the Ambassador's condition as Dr. Hanter won't leave his side at the moment. As he told you, the Ambassador has contracted a virus which is common among our youth. It usually causes sniffles, possible an ear infection, and maybe a brief fever." He paused. "You know, a typical cold, but he hasn't any immunity to it." He turned back to Dr. Gowandle. "Your blood tests are in, Dr. Gowandle. You're perfectly fine. Also, you and the Ambassador are the exact same blood type as hard as that may be to believe, considering he's not from our world."

"Which means?" Dr. Kaynobble asked.

"If Dr. Gowandle were to agree to it," Dr. Territin replied, "we could give the Ambassador a transfusion of her blood and hope the antibodies in it would assist his immune system in fighting the virus as she, like just about everyone else, had this particular virus as a child." The hedgehog shrugged. "It's all we've got at this point."

She wigwagged her tail and looked to her mate with hesitation clearly written across her muzzle.

"Why do you hesitate, love?" Dr. Kaynobble asked, scooting down and grasping her forepaws in his.

She drooped her tail, looked to her doctor, who got the hint. He left to give them some privacy.

"Raoul, after all these years, you don't know? Even after how we pledged ourselves to one another yesterday evening, you don't understand? By my people's traditions, if I offer him my blood, we would be mates." Tears welled up in her eyes as she fought down the mixed emotions within. Her love for him and her fear of the Ambassador coming between their love for one another.

Dr. Kaynobble scooped her up and hugged her close. “It’s alright. Hush...sssshhhh.” He continued to embrace her as she let the tears flow freely and sobbed into his shoulder, wrapping her tail partially around him just like the previous day.

“But...”

Again, he shushed her as he continued to hug her close. “If I must share you with him, I will. However, I don’t think I will need to. I think you’ll find his traditions are different.”

“Really?”

(affirmativeflick) “Come. Let’s go see if you can save the Ambassador,” he said and winked. “The legal stuff can wait whether it is a joint or triple filing.”

SIXTEEN

Early that evening, Dr. Territin came back into the waiting room pushing Butternut on a wheelchair. “It appears to be working. He’s stabilized for now. Dr. Hanter believes it’ll be another day or so before we’ll know for sure. The two of you should go home. We’ll alert you if things change.”

“Thank you, Dr. Territin,” Butternut responded as she got out of the wheelchair. Her flatpanel chirped with an incoming message. She reached for it commenting, “Who could possibly be calling me? It’s not like I’ve announced my return.”

It wasn’t a call, but a text message. Her tail twitched as she read it. She read it a second time in disbelief and turned back to Dr. Territan. “Will Dr. Hanter need any more blood from me?”

“I don’t know.”

“Please go check with him. I’ll need to give it this evening or tomorrow at the latest.”

“Why?”

She held up the flatpanel with the message still clearly on it. “I need to report to the Capital District in four days. I’ve just been chosen as Representative for our Northeastern Hills Region for the 807th Parliament.” She drooped her tail. “I’m back only for a few days.” She shook her head. “What are the chances?”

Dr. Territan left. Butternut read the message again. “Wait, this message is a week old. I’m already late!” She chattered in panic. She was losing the fight with her wild cousin instincts. She needed to flee, but there was nowhere to go.

Sensing what was wrong, Raoul scooped her up to try and calm her. “You’re safe in my embrace. I’ll take you outside and you can climb and feel safe until you calm down. We can work through this afterward.” He carried her snuggled against his chest. She quivered against his embrace as her tail wigwagged uncontrollably. He made his way as quickly as he could out of the hospital, alerting a nurse along the way where they would be. As soon as they were outside, Butternut leapt up the closest tree crying out, “Danger!” in chitterspeak as she fled. Raoul shed a few tears. It was hard seeing her like this, but he would remain true to his pledge to her no matter what. He had waited six years to try and help her adjust.

He looked at her flatpanel she had left with him as she fled. There was a second unopened message, also from the Representative lottery system, time-stamped a few clicks after the previous message. *Well, we are mates now, right?* He thought to himself. *Hopefully, she’ll forgive me.* He opened the message:

We are in receipt your auto-response. Due to the unusual circumstances of your current assignment, Dr. Gowandle, your requirement to serve as Representative of Northeastern Hills Region is deferred until next term. Hopefully, you will receive this message prior to that time. Please confirm receipt as soon as you can.

Raoul sighed in relief. This was good. Emotionally, she wasn’t ready to serve as Representative. Also, he had put in a petition for the Representative for their region in the upcoming parliament to consider. It wouldn’t look good if it was his wife who brought it forward. With little thought to the process, he snagged the flatpanel on his fur, the back surface of which worked somewhat like what the Ambassador compared to ‘Velcro’ back on Terra, and begin to climb. Maybe this bit of good news would help Butternut calm down quicker. They had five months to work on helping her learn to control her instincts.

Far above him, Butternut chirped, “danger,” and wigwagged her tail.

SEVENTEEN

Very slowly, Aldin became aware of his surroundings. He couldn’t smell anything as his nose felt like someone had stuffed large acorns up it. However, his hearing seemed to work alright. From the sounds around him, he figured he must be in a hospital room. Slowly, he opened his eyes and quickly blinked them multiple times against the brightness.

“Someone get Dr. Hanter. He’s coming around.”

His mouth and throat were extremely dry. He couldn’t even rasp out a request for water. Someone must have known he would want some for they gently raised his muzzle with their paw

and with an eye dropper, dripped cool, refreshing water into his mouth. He tried to lap at it greedily.

“Easy, take it slow, Ambassador. I don’t want you to choke on it.”

He looked about without moving his head. His eyes couldn’t quite focus. He did recognize the next voice.

“I’m glad you’ve pulled through the worst of it,” Dr. Hanter spoke, while checking his vitals. “Take it slow and easy. You’ve still got a long road to recovery.”

Aldin tried to speak, but the rabbit hushed him. “Save it. Concentrate on recovery. The nurse here will continue to give you water slowly. Once you show you can lap it on your own, she’ll give you a dish.”

Aldin weakly wigwagged his tail to indicate he understood.

“I don’t want to overwhelm you with details, Ambassador. However, I also know it’ll gnaw at you if I don’t give you a basic summary of what happened. Briefly, your luck ran out. That wild cousin who bit you gave you what we consider a head cold. It nearly killed you, possibly proving your story some didn’t believe when you first arrived that you aren’t from our world. It is fortunate for you that you found Dr. Gowandle and brought her back with you. Amazingly, you’re the same blood type. We gave you a transfusion of her blood and your body accepted her antibodies as your own, enabling you to fight off the virus. But it was touch and go for a while.”

Aldin briefly raised his head off the nurse’s paw and nodded. He then lowered it and continued to accept water a few drops at a time.

“You’ve been unconscious for four days. How much longer you are here will depend on how quickly you recover. Wag your tail up and down once if you want visitors right off. I will allow them, but only if you don’t try and talk back to them at the moment. Oh, and if your incisors seem extra sharp, it’s because we had a dentist drop by yesterday and filed them down. I’m amazed how much they had grown in just a few days.”

That might explain the gritty feeling in my mouth, Aldin thought to himself as he lifted his tail up and down once. He couldn’t recall a time when he felt so weak. He continued to suck at the drops of water trickled into his mouth.

Dr. Hanter peaked out the door and nodded. “Remember, don’t try to make him talk. 25 ceclicks at most. He needs more rest,” he warned Aophril and Orlan as they entered.

“Yes, Doctor. We understand,” Orlan responded.

Aophril sat on a cushion out of the nurse's way, but where Aldin could see her. Orlan stood behind her with a forepaw on her shoulder. He gently squeezed her shoulder in reassurance.

"You had us so worried," Aophril started. "But we're not the only ones worried, so we won't stay long and will pass the word along. We're just happy to see you're on the mend." She brushed a tear away from her eye.

Aldin flicked his tail as he was in no condition to talk and knew if he tried, Dr. Hanter would get on his case. The nurse moved a dish of water under his muzzle. He slowly, but steadily lapped at it. The coolness of it seemed to quickly soothe his dry throat.

"Take care, Aldin. We haven't rented out your room yet," Orlan added with a gigglechitter. "It'll be waiting for you when you are discharged."

After the two left, Aldin looked to his nurse and moved his mouth away from the dish to indicate he had enough for the moment. He vaguely registered the tubes in his arm as he curled back-up and allowed sleep to retake him.

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 chattered 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 then 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.

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 gigglechittered 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.

TWENTY

A click or so later and another bowl of pine nuts demolished, Aldin was starting to feel better, though he knew he had a way to go yet. It must have been a shift change for the otter bid his fair well and a female sheep took his place. The ewe refilled his water dish as Dr. Hanter and Dr. Territan entered. They checked him over.

“I’m amazed,” Dr. Hanter stated.

“Dr. Kaynoble explained it well based on how much he’s studied wild cousins,” Dr. Territan responded.

“Explained what?”

“How your body reacted to fighting the virus. Much like a wild cousin squirrel will slip into a near hibernation state during a long snow storm, you slept in a similar state while you healed. Except, in your case, the ‘storm’ was ragging inside of you.”

They signaled to the nurse to remove the tubes from his arm.

“Dr. Hanter is handing your care off to me,” Dr. Territan stated.

Aldin looked to the elder rabbit.

“I was within days of retiring when a strange wild cousin-like squirrel with a broken arm was wheeled into my clinic last summer. Again, I was getting ready to retire roughly a week ago when you were rushed into this hospital. Now that you’re on the mend, call me selfish, but I don’t want to delay that retirement any longer. Dr. Territan knows more than I do about wild cousin-like squirrel physiology thanks to his work with Dr. Butternut Gowandle. You’ll be in good paws.”

“Thank you for all you’ve done for me, Dr. Hanter,” was all Aldin could think of and then added, “Enjoy your retirement.” They shook paws and the elderly rabbit departed. Aldin turned to the hedgehog gauging him.

Dr. Territan scrolled through something on his flatpanel. “I know it can be tough to switch doctors, Ambassador, but I’ll try to make things as smooth as I can. Looking at this, I want to keep you another couple of nights. If your vitals continue to look this good, you’ll be allowed to leave then.”

“Thank you, Doctor.” Aldin’s stomach rumbled again. “I don’t suppose I can have something a little more filling than pine nuts?”

Dr. Territan chuckled and signaled the nurse with a paw gesture. “He’s clear to order a meal appropriate for his species from the kitchen.”

“Does the kitchen have any butternuts?”

They did to his delight. As he finished his meal, there was a brief knock on the door and a fox poked his muzzle through the door.

“May I speak to you a moment, Ambassador?”

“Come in,” he looked at the fox with a puzzled look. “Do I know you?”

“No, not yet. I am Daon,” the fox bowed, “Representative for the Northeastern Hills Region for the current 807th Parliament. Parliament is in session. When word reached us of your illness, the members of parliament were greatly concerned. I have been asked to see you personally, once you were well enough to have visitors. It is good to see you appear to be on the mend.”

“You have 25 ceklicks, Representative,” the nurse butted in. “Doctor’s orders.” She turned to Aldin. “Page me if you need me.” She set a cushion down for Daon and left the room.

Daon made himself comfortable. “I won’t take much of your time, Ambassador. I know you need more time to recover.” He paused a moment at the look Aldin was giving him. He looked around and then back at Aldin. “What?”

“Oh, I am sorry, Representative. I’m just amused. What are the chances of a fox being this region’s representative in two of the past three sessions? I hope they aren’t trying to make you Chancellor on my account.” He giggled.

Daon blinked a moment puzzling that over and then laughed. “No. I’m only a Representative. Once you have recovered and you have been discharged, Ambassador, the Parliament requests your presence at the session in progress. Normally, you would have just received a message with the request, but considering your recent illness, it was deemed better to have someone give it to you in person.”

“I will be there as soon as I can, Representative Daon. If I had not had this set back, I would have contacted,” Aldin paused, “well, I’m not sure who. I guess whoever provides admin support to Parliament to see if I needed to be there in person for the session. The rules seem a little vague about foreign representatives and when they need to be present.”

Daon nodded. “Usually, the presence of a foreign representative is only requested if there are issues to be discussed with the foreign government or issues concerning the representative.”

Aldin drooped his tail. “Unless you have found some way to contact my people, then I assume it is issues dealing with me.”

Daon smirked. “It’s not as bad as you may fear, Ambassador. However, I’m not authorized to say more. Please show up as soon as you can.”

“You can let Parliament know that provided I am discharged on time; I should be able to attend by the end of the week or the first of next week at the latest.

TWENTY-ONE

True to his word, four days later, Aldin entered the Parliament chamber. He took the seat cushion indicated to him down front near the visitor’s circle.

“Representative Daon of the Northeast Hills Region has the floor.”

The fox descended to the bottom of the chamber and turned to the other representatives. “As requested by the other members of Parliament, I, personally summoned Aldin Busheytail the Younger, Ambassador of the Nah-mah-can’t-ah Free Squirrels of the planet Terra to this session. As you are aware, he suffered serious illness recently and was just discharged from the hospital earlier this week. Fortunately, as you can see, he’s on the mend. I have been asked to speak on this matter as the Ambassador is currently living in my Region.”

Daon turned to Aldin. “Ambassador, you’ve been summoned here in person due to complaints about you filed by various citizens in several Regions.”

Aldin’s tail began to wigwag. He fought down the fear brought on by the sudden and vague accusations. If this wasn’t as “bad as he feared” he’d dread to learn what Daon meant by “truly bad”.

“It seems you’ve been working for barter instead of credit payment for the work rendered. A farmer in the High Lakes Region reported you traded your time in a meet-and-greet at his farm in exchange for your weight, roughly half a kilo, in cheese. At a day care, you played with the children for a click in exchange for produce from the day care provider’s garden. I could list dozens more complaints like this. The largest complaint came from Nadowahoc College where you have been ‘volunteering’ since last fall assisting Dr. Raoul Kaynobble with his wild cousin squirrel research.”

Aldin's tail wigwagged rapidly. *Why didn't Dr. Kaynobble speak to me directly on this?* raced through his mind.

Daon looked directly at Aldin. "This is in direct violation of our laws in which one must be paid fairly in credits for the work they've rendered. We understand about diplomatic immunity, Ambassador. However, these violations need to stop.

"It takes two to commit this crime, the laborer and the employer. Charges against your various employers have been waived as they all filed complaints. All the complaints were the same. When they tried to pay you in credits, they couldn't. They were blocked from doing so. Dr. Kaynobble's staff even tried to pay the Embassy account and that, too, was blocked. Which, we deduce is why you bartered." He paused looking at Aldin.

"Yes, Representative. While the Embassy account provides a way for me to charge for purchases. That account is strictly for Embassy-related expenses such as my travel from the Forest Hills Region to this session of Parliament. I wasn't sure what else I could do to pay for personal purchases including basic necessities such as food. It would not be right for me to charge personal purchases to the Embassy account."

Daon nodded. "Upon investigation, we determined the root cause of the problem, which had forced you to barter. On behalf of all present, we apologize for the oversight of those who came before us and didn't realize this when you first arrived among us. By our current laws, only a citizen can be employed and paid. Please understand, we haven't had a non-citizen on Earth in a little over two-hundred years. The world network credit payment system was implemented roughly 50 years ago. There was no need to program into the system a way to pay non-citizens as non-citizens hadn't existed in over 150 years at that time. Research was conducted by those present who serve in the finance sector to see what can be done to rectify the problem."

Daon paused and shook his head. "Those who created the system were either optimistic that the world would forever remain united or it simply never occurred to them that maybe someday we'd make contact with another civilization. The best estimates our financial people can give to recode our financial system to allow non-citizens to work and get paid, without breaking the rest of the system is about a year. Part of the problem is that the code hasn't been touched in decades."

Aldin cut in. "There is a saying back home. 'If it is not broken, do not try to fix it.' I understand what your programmers may be up against. You fix one line of code and it will break three others."

Daon nodded. "Exactly. But that solution doesn't resolve the issue for some time. So, we had to come up with a different solution, which also took some research." Daon looked toward the Chancellor's podium where a brown bat wearing pince-nez style spectacles stood. "I surrender the floor to the Chancellor."

The bat nodded. “Yes, from here, it becomes my duty. Ambassador, please come forward.” Aldin complied. The bat fiddled a moment with his spectacles and scrolled through his flatpanel a moment looking for something. “Ah, here it is. My apologies for not being better prepared.”

The bat turned to the Representatives. “Al-din Bush-E-tail the Younger of Terra has lived among us for the past,” he glanced down again, “six-and-a-half months. In that time, he has contributed to our society. Despite the employment violations beyond his control he has obeyed our other laws. When one of our members in a previous Parliament was unjustly accused of crime and punished, he fought for that citizen’s release and to clear his name. He has served as a goodwill Representative,” the bat paused a moment, “or as his people call his position, Ambassador. I have read through testimony from several parents on how he interacted with their children speaking and playing at their level. Dr. Raoul Kaynobble of Nadowahoc College provided extensive recorded verbal testimony on how the Ambassador has advanced his research. These are just a few examples of how he has served among us.” The bat paused a moment and looked about. “Does anyone have any complaints beyond the employment issue to file against the Ambassador?”

The Chancellor paused again and there were none. Inside he sighed with relief hoping this would go just as in the rehearsal the week before.

“This Parliament has also heard from roughly a dozen citizens testifying that the Ambassador has confided in them that given a choice, even if a way back to Terra was found, he’d prefer to remain on Earth.” The bat looked directly at Aldin. “Is this true, Ambassador?”

“Yes, given the choice, I would stay here. Though, if there were a way, I would go home briefly and encourage others to flee our war and resettle here.” He looked around the chamber, “with permission, of course,” he added.

The bat nodded. “Given the programming difficulties of our currency system, there is only one other solution at hand. You’ll need to become a citizen.” Aldin’s mind began to race with a combination of excitement, surprise and touch of dread, though he had no idea why he felt that last bit. The bat droned on without pause. “We have not naturalized someone in over two hundred years. Based on what we could find in the old laws, you have met the minimum residency requirement of 5 months. You have received positive testimony from at least three non-related citizens. Are you willing to become a citizen?”

The question caught Aldin off guard and his hesitation was noticed by all within the chamber. His tail wigwagged back and forth a couple times. “My apologies for not answering quickly, Chancellor. You have surprised me. I am honored by the offer.” Aldin bowed. “Yes, I would accept the honor of becoming an Earth citizen.

“Very well. Al-din Bush-E-tail the Younger, please face me, and raise your left hand...er forepaw.” Aldin did so as his tail twitched slightly back and forth. The Chancellor paused again and then looked directly at Aldin. “Repeat after me and fill in the appropriate terms where necessary. I, state your name and species.”

Again he hesitated. “Chancellor, before I do so, I need a little assistance.”

The Chancellor blinked at the interruption. “With what?”

“I am not sure what species to call myself. Genetically, I am an altered wild cousin squirrel, but I think some citizens and some Representatives present would object if I declared that as my species.”

There were some murmurs in the chamber at that.

“And I cannot just call myself a squirrel as I am not an Earth squirrel either.” Aldin paused a moment in thought. “Maybe...” he paused again. “I need help with one word I’m lacking in the common language. What is the difference among those present in this chamber and your wild cousins? What makes you different other than you are larger?”

There was some whispering across the chamber. Finally, a wolf stood.

“The Chancellor recognizes, the Representative of the Acadian Valley District.”

“Thank you, Chancellor. I may not be the best with words. What makes us different is that we are self-aware unlike wild cousins.”

Aldin twitched his tail. Part of him wanted to argue that based on what he’d experienced in the forest preserve, but this wasn’t the time or place. Instead, he asked, “Is there a specific word for that self-awareness?”

“Sentient,” a panda to the wolf’s right chimed in.

The wolf turned to his colleague, thanked him and sat.

“Sentient,” Aldin repeated to himself. “Thank you, Representatives.” He turned back to the Chancellor. “Please forgive me for interrupting the ceremony. I’m really ready now.”

The bat smiled and stared over. “Repeat after me and fill in the appropriate terms where necessary. I, state your name and species.”

“I, Aldin Busheytail the Younger, a Sentient Cousin Squirrel.”

There were a few murmurs in the chamber that quickly quieted at a glance from the Chancellor. He looked back at his flatpanel and then at Aldin. “Pledge that I will bear allegiance.”

“Pledge that I will bear allegiance...”

“...to the United Earth Government.”

“To the United Earth Government.”

“And that I will faithfully observe and preserve the laws of Earth...”

“And that I will faithfully observe and preserve the laws of Earth...”

“And fulfil my duties as an Earth citizen.”

“And fulfil my duties as an Earth citizen.”

The Chancellor smiled and looked to those in the chamber. “Please help me congratulate our newest citizen. Citizen Al-din Bush-E-tail the Younger is our first non-native born citizen in a little over two-hundred years.”

Loud cheering erupted around the chamber. After it trailed off, the Chancellor turned again to Aldin. “Citizen Aldin, this Parliament requests that you remain in your post as Ambassador Representative for your people on Terra.”

“As requested, I shall continue to serve, Chancellor.” Aldin bowed.

“While you serve as such, you are exempt from the Representative lottery. We had to adjust the law slightly. Previously, it only referred to Citizens serving as a Representative of our government to another.”

The bat turned to the chamber. “Is there any other business we need to conduct today?” He paused to the silence. “Then please join us next door to celebrate this special occasion.” The bat slammed his gavel on the podium. “This day’s session is adjourned!”

Immediately, Aldin was surrounded by well-wishers. As a group they departed to the reception.

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.

TWENTY-THREE

The following day Karle and Giguere were present in Dr. Kaynobble’s office along with Aldin, Butternut, and the wild squirrel who stuck close to her.

“The tests are back from biology,” Dr. Kaynobble started. “She died of the same strain of virus that nearly killed you, Ambassador. There was residual remains of the same strain in the tranquilizer darts. Biology also reports there was a vile of that strain missing from their immunology lab. This strain of virus isn’t airborne. You have to come into contact with it. Someone who is sick rubs their hands against their nose, touch a surface, someone else touches the same surface and touches their nose or rubs their eyes, etc.”

Aldin’s tail thrashed about in agitation. “I do not know about the rest of you, but I can easily connect the dots here.”

They stared blankly at him over the analogy.

(drooptail) “I am sorry for the Terran saying. I thought there might be something like it here. Let me try again. I can easily follow the trail here to the conclusion. Someone hacked your orders, Dr. Kaynobble, as to where in the forest preserve I was to be filmed. They intentionally infected the female squirrel there with this virus, probably only a day or two before my encounter with her to ensure she was contagious, but not yet showing signs of the virus. That would be another reason the alternative weather dates were so close to the date chosen for the filming. Though we do not couple, she bites me and infects me. It’s obvious whoever the perpetrator is wanted to try to kill me or at the minimum get me in deep trouble or possibly both. And do it in such a way that it would look accidental. Instead, an innocent life and possible unborn pups were the victims.”

“And whoever they are would have succeeded, if you hadn’t found me when you did,” Butternut added.

Dr. Kaynobble sighed deeply. “She was pregnant, but very early on. I have already notified the authorities. As this is an attempted murder case along with the confirmed poaching of a protected species, I had to report it as is the law. They will probably question each of us. Tell them what you know. Don’t hold anything back.”

“It shouldn’t be too hard for them to find the perpetrator, should it?” Giguere asked.

“Normally, yes, it would be quick,” Karle replied. “They could just look at the computer logs for the area hovercrafts for the time period in question, and eliminate those used by students and staff for legitimate research. Maybe do likewise to trace who had the darts printed. And video camera footage to see who stole the virus vile from the lab. But I don’t think that it will be the case.”

“Agreed,” Aldin chimed in. “If they could hack Dr. Kaynobble’s orders, they can hack those other records and alter or eliminate them.”

Meanwhile, Butternut explained in simple terms to her grandpup what had happened to his mate and that the biggens would search for who killed her.

“You’ll need to coax him to allow biology to exam him as a precaution,” Aldin piped in. “Either he had a milder version of the virus when he was younger, or he was lucky to not catch it from his mate.”

“He’s too afraid,” she responded.

Aldin leapt up on the desk. “After I trap you, did I lie to you?” he asked the wild squirrel in chitterspeak.

(negativeflick)

“Biggens fear you get sick like mate. Granddame and I go with you. Biggens test me first show you what they do. You see is safe.”

He hesitantly agreed. True to his word, Aldin had biology do every test slowly on him before they did the same to the wild squirrel. Butternut served as a security blanket when her grandpup got scared. When done, they learned he had the antibodies to the virus and reassured him he did well and was safe. They were gone from Dr. Kaynobble’s office about a klick.

Upon returning, and learning the wild squirrel was free of the virus, Dr. Kaynobble brought up the subject of the squirrel’s future. “He needs to decide where he will live. He can’t really stay here among us. It’s not healthy for him. I can just imagine how much his heart is racing while

he's in here. I think he hasn't gone into panic flight simply because of how long he's known you, love."

"I know," Butternut said and drooped her tail.

He switched to chitterspeak. "Grandpup."

"I no your grandpup."

"I know. I have no other name for you. Biggens use names. You like grandpup to my mate. Make you like grandpup to me. You can't stay here. Not good for squirrel to live with biggens."

(affirmativeflick) "Young pup, my dame warn me danger. No trust biggens long or depend on biggens. Depend on biggens no live on own."

"Dame was wise elder," Dr. Kaynobble praised. "You see trees outside. No squirrel claim this territory near biggens. You near biggens if you claim, but not with biggens."

(negativeflick) "Too open. No easy hide from sky predators. I go home."

"Yes, we take you home. Or we take you different territory. We biggens watch squirrels in forest. I know female who just mate. She have pups early. Needs help. May not want help or may accept help."

"Like granddame raise me?"

(affirmativeflick)

"If female no accept?"

"We take you to home territory."

The wild squirrel wigwagged his tail slowly. "I try."

"Friend," Dr. Kaynobble pointed to Aldin, "will take you as soon as you wish to go."

The wild squirrel looked towards Butternut. "You no my granddame. Like granddame. I no forget." She embraced him and he hugged back. When she let go he said, "I leave now."

TWENTY-FOUR

(CHATTER!) "My territory! LEAVE!"

Aldin held his “ground” on the tree branch and the female wild squirrel chattered again. But she also didn’t give chase, especially, when there were two males she was trying to defend against.

“I no stay. I leave soon,” Aldin said. “Come smell. You no bite. I no bite. I no harm you. I no harm pups.”

The female cautiously moved towards him and sniffed. Her eyes shot wide as she leapt back. “Biggen!” She chattered her teeth in fear. Only the knowledge of her pups in the tree hollow nearby kept her from fleeing.

(affirmativeflick) “I small biggen. Biggens watch. Biggens know predator kill your mate. Biggens know you have pups. Biggens worried. Hard raise pups alone. Forest need more squirrels.” He pointed to Butternut’s grandson. “Small biggen raise him. He squirrel like you. He help raise pups. When they grow up if you no want him stay, he leave.”

She looked to the other squirrel. “He speak true?”

“He no lie. You share territory I help raise pups. When pups grow up you tell me leave, I leave.” He dropped his tail and looked down. “Predator kill my mate before pups come.”

She wasted no time. “We sniff.”

Aldin backed aside so the two could smell each other.

“Biggen and squirrel.”

“Yes, after mate die I live with biggens for,” he raised two claws on one paw trying to remember the word Butternut had used.

“Two,” Aldin said.

“Two days. I leave. I small pup dame warn me no depend on biggens or must stay with biggens.”

“My dame say same.” She glared at Aldin. “LEAVE!” (chatterspit!)

“I leave after you say he leave or he stay,” Aldin stated. “If you no want him, I take him to his territory. Either way I leave gift.” He pointed to a backpack he had set on the branch. “Biggen thing full of seed.”

“If I tell him leave?”

“I leave seed then we leave.”

The female wigwagged her tail slowly and then approached Butternut's grandson again and slowly sniffed him over and invited him to do likewise. When they finished, she spoke again pointing to the grandson with her tail. "You help raise pups, you stay." She glared at Aldin. "Small biggen leave!" She chittergrowled.

"He," Aldin tailpointed to the grandson, "know how to use biggen seed holder. He carry where you say. I leave now."

"Friend, tell Granddame I no forget," Butternut's grandson said as he wiggled into the knapsack as Aldin had shown him on the trip out to this location.

"I will."

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 wigwag uncontrollable. 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.”

TWENTY-SIX

Raoul look up as someone knocked at his office door. “Enter.”

A male fox entered and bowed. “You asked to see me, Dr. Kaynobble.”

“Yes, Representative Daon, I did. Have a seat.” Raoul waved to a cushion across from his desk. “Thank you for seeing me despite your busy schedule.”

“Then you know, Dr. Kaynobble that I can’t spare much time.”

“Yes, I’ll come to the point quickly. You run a wild cousin small rodent extermination service, correct?”

Daon closed his eyes briefly. “Yes, though I haven’t been able to concentrate on it while Parliament has been in session.”

Raoul nodded. "If this next question gets too personal, tell me and forgive me. Do you enjoy your job?"

Daon sighed deeply in thought before answering. "No. I don't enjoy taking all those lives. There's just so many of them. I can't keep up with it. And I don't have enough outlets for the resulting meat. Wild cousin rodent isn't as popular as it was in my father's time. That means many I kill are killed for nothing other than they've become a nuisance to whoever has hired me to eliminate them. I only went into it because it is the family business."

Raoul nodded. "Thank you for being so honest. Have you considered trap and release?"

Daon laughed for a moment and trailed off as he look at Raoul and realized the raccoon was serious. "No. Where could I release them where they wouldn't cause someone else trouble?"

"Deep in the forest preserve."

"What?"

Raoul tapped an icon on his flat panel. "I've just sent you my wife's report from her six years of living in the forest among the wild cousin squirrels. It's an interesting read when you've got the time. In summary, they're numbers are in decline. Based on my wife's observations, the main reason for the decline is increased predation. Predation by predators that usual hunt wild cousin rodents. In her time out there, she didn't observe a wild cousin rodent once nor signs of any. I had some of our students set-up camera traps in various placed in the forest. While those traps took pictures of predators, birds and wild-cousin squirrels, there was no sign of any wild cousin rodents. We're not sure what killed them off, but..."

"But as wild cousin rodents are near the bottom of the food chain, with them gone, it's upset the entire balance."

"Correct. And that's where you come in. How many small cousin rodents do you exterminate in a typical day?"

"On a good day, fifty."

"With our current research budget, we can easily take twice that and release them in the forest preserve. We have the funds to cover the cost of doing so for at least one month with delivery rates at that level at your current rate of charge."

"Seriously?"

"Yes."

“You have a deal, Dr. Kaynobble.” Daon reached across the desk to shake paws.

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 cekklicks 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 gigglechittered. “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.

“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...”

TWENTY-EIGHT: EPILOGUE

The pause in the late winter storm didn’t last long as the winds started to pick-up again. This was the second day for it in the forest. There was little the squirrel family could do but hunker down in their tree hollow and wait for better weather. Their internal weather sense told them it would be another day or two before it would let up. Just as the winds picked up again, the male slipped in and dragged a backpack after him into the hollow. He shook snow off his fur.

“See, biggen seed holder thing useful,” he stated as he opened the pack up and passed nuts from within to the hungry pups and the female.

The pups nibbled greedily on the food offered. After eating through nearly half the contents of the pack, they pleaded for a story.

Their dame nibbled on a nut offered to her by the male who was not the sire of her pups, but they were too young to know that yet. She was growing to like him. He was as dependable as her late mate had been. He risked his life going out in the storm to get food for the pups, though they weren’t his. Though he used the biggen thing, she could see that it was useful in this instance. She immediately knew which story she would tell her pups on that stormy day. Maybe the male had never heard it himself.

“I speak story dame speak once. Her dame speak her. Her dame dame speak her dame and back.” She paused. “I no know how far. Long, long time ago. Different biggens then. No like biggens now. Strange biggens have little fur, stand and walk on back legs. Big as bears. Biggens predators. Biggens prey on all other animals,” she paused, “and on each other.” Her pups shuddered. “Biggens take squirrels and make smart like our biggens. Smart squirrels escape from biggens, fear biggens eat them. Smart squirrels live deep in forest far from strange biggens.

“Biggens no wise. Biggens think they wise. Think they control all. Biggens make big fire. Fire top predator. Biggens no control fire. Fire grow and grow, burn and burn.” She shuddered. “Fire burn and eat around whole world. All Biggens die. Most animals, prey, predators, birds all die. Fire kill, eat all. Burn and eat all trees and plants.” The pups shuddered. They didn’t really know what fire was, but if it could kill and eat predators and trees, it was very strong whatever it was. Just then the tree swayed in a very strong gust of wind, adding to their fears. It was a very big tree and took a lot of wind to make it move at all.

“Smart squirrels know many things when fire come.” Their dame drooped her tail. “They no know how stop fire. Many flee from fire, go far, far away and no return. No all escape. Those no escape hide in burrows like woodchucks. Burrows full of food, nuts and seeds. Some other animals also hide in burrows. After fire eat all on surface, have no more to eat, it starve and die.

“Then animals who hide in burrows come out. Smart squirrels replant forest. Smart squirrel elders fear more fire. Elders fear squirrels make mistake like old biggens and fire then come back. Elders command smart squirrels forget biggen ways. Is only way stop fire come back. Most obey. That is why we no like biggens now.”

“What of smart squirrels no obey elders?” the male the pups thought was their sire asked.

“Yes, some smart squirrels no obey elders. They driven away from forest. In time they grow big and turn into our biggens. They grow lonely and make other biggens.” She looked directly at her pups. “You no trust biggens. Danger. You trust biggens long you forget how live like squirrel. Then you depend on biggens to live or you die.” She wigwagged her tail in warning.

“Is true,” the male added. “When I still pup, predator kill and eat my dame and sire.” The pups shuddered as the male drooped his tail. “Biggen raise me. I start depend on biggens. I start forget how live like squirrel. Is easy forget. Biggens give me all food I can eat. I no need search for food. Predators fear biggens. I no need watch for predators. Biggen raise me see I start forget. Biggen warn me. I must leave or be like pup forever. I choose to leave. She wise biggen. She no stop me. Other biggen give me seed holder thing. Gift remember them. I no forget.” He pointed to the backpack with his tail in the dim light coming from the opening to their tree hollow. “Then I find your dame.” He affectionately nuzzled her and she nuzzled him back without hesitation.

Yes, she decided, she would keep him.