

ONE

“I am thankful you are able to work this trip into your schedule, Ambassador.”

Aldin nodded at the woodchuck who had spoken sitting across from him on the flitter and glanced at the raccoon next to him before replying. “It is my pleasure, Fousette. And it was easy to work this in as I already have business to conduct in Central Lakes and Forests District. I’m just sorry Dr. Kaynobble’s wife couldn’t join us. Though, it’s obvious why Representative Butternut could not do so.”

Raoul sighed. “Yes, I was hoping we could do this trip earlier in the summer before the next session of Parliament started. It took longer for Fousette’s people to go through our video footage than anticipated.” He glanced at the woodchuck, “I don’t blame you. I simply underestimated how much footage I had.”

“Well, at least I think I’ve got some of the basics down on wild cousin chitterspeak,” Fousette replied.

Raoul turned back to Aldin. “Here’s hoping the 808th Parliament can complete all their business through video conference. Butternut is still unsure of her ability to quell the wild cousin fear within her.”

“It takes practice,” Aldin responded, “as I’ve tried to reassure her and you. She barely left paw prints the last time Mara visited to let her practice.”

“Mara? Past Chancellor Mara?” Fousette asked.

Aldin nodded. “We’re good friends, so she agreed to help. And it’s been helpful.” He looked again at Raoul Kaynobble. “Now, why exactly are we travelling to Central Lakes and Forests District? While I’ve got some business to attend to, you haven’t said much as to why you and Fousette are travelling. You said it’s to see an old friend, but what does that have to do with Fousette’s documentary work?”

Raoul sighed again. “It is a long story. This friend is also where I first heard the ‘Biggen’ creation tale you heard in the forest preserve this past spring, Ambassador. As this is a long flight, I’ll try to explain it the best I can. It all started about a year before you arrived among us...”

Raoul sat in his office at Nadowahoc College going over some exams when his flatpanel chimed. He answered it and saw a citizen squirrel on screen with peppery gray fur and rounded ears.

“Dr. Kaynobble of Nadowahoc College?”

“Speaking. Who are you?”

The squirrel looked relieved. “My name is Jessophat. I’ve been bounced around from person to person trying to find someone who can help me. Well, help a family friend anyway. Everyone I contacted said I need to try someone else until the last one said I really should try you as you are an expert on wild cousin squirrels.”

“That is my specialty, Jessophat.”

Jessophat’s eyes darted about briefly and he lowered his voice slightly. “Please promise me you won’t cut me off and disconnect my call if you think I’m crazy.” He paused a moment as Raoul raised one eyebrow. “Wild cousin squirrels aren’t dumb animals. They’re self-aware.”

Raoul stared at the squirrel a moment.

“You do think I’m crazy, don’t you?”

Raoul sat back and shook his head in the negative. “No, I don’t think you’re crazy, Jessophat. I’ve been studying them for some time. I agree with you, but I haven’t got enough data to go public on it. How did you come to this conclusion?”

Jessophat glanced off-screen and then moved over. A smaller peppery gray furred squirrel with rounded ears came forward. It chittered and wigwagged its tail. “Hello, Biggen elder raccoon,” it spoke nervously in chitterspeak. “Biggen Squirrels call me Pinecone.”

Raoul looked to his two fellow travelers. “That first video meeting lasted nearly a klick¹. I quickly rearranged my teaching schedule, booked a flitter flight, and went out to meet Pinecone, Jessophat, and his family...”

¹ Klick-hour