

FIVE

Their hovercraft came to a halt and settled onto the forest floor next to the butternut tree Jessophat's family lived in. Jessophat was there ready to greet his guests.

"Raoul, welcome back." He pulled the raccoon into an embrace before turning to Aldin and bowing. "It is an honor to have you visit our humble home, Ambassador."

Raoul introduced Fousette who shook hands with Jessophat. He did his best to not stare at Jessophat's claw-like fingernails.

"I'll gladly help you move your gear into our guest quarters." Jessophat pointed to a ladder with his tail. "I've already deployed our ladder anticipating you and Fousette will find it useful."

Excited chittering echoed through the canopy as a small gray blur raced down the trunk and leapt at Raoul, nearly knocking him over as he was embraced in a hug. After disentangling, the small gray squirrel pulled a small flatpanel off its back, typed furiously on it, then the blind reader vocalized the message in Common. "I'm so happy to see you Elder Curious. As you can hear, I learn how to read/write Biggenspeak. Biggen flatpanel speak it for me." Pinecone smiled proud at her accomplishment wigwagging her tail in a flourish as she looked up at Raoul. Only then did she notice Fousette and Aldin. She squeaked in startlement and looked towards the tree ready to bolt.

"Pinecone, these are my friends. They will not harm you." Raoul pointed first to Fousette, "Fousette makes educational films." The woodchuck bowed to the wild cousin squirrel.

"I'm delighted to meet you, Pinecone. 'Elder Curious' has told me a lot about you. I understand if you need to sniff me."

Pinecone cautiously approached him and sniffed and then backed off. She typed into her flatpanel again and the reader stated, "Thank you, Woodchuck Foo-set."

Raoul then pointed to Aldin, "and this is Aldin Busheytail the Younger, Ambassador for the Nah-mah-kant-ah Free Squirrels of the planet Terra."

Pinecone's eyes shot wide briefly and then she hid her face in her tail. "I no worthy meet such Elder," she mumbled in chitterspeak.

Aldin chattered reassuringly at the wild cousin squirrel, which got her to slightly lower her tail and look at him. He addressed her in chitterspeak. "First name mean Friend. Friend no Elder, Pinecone. I alone here. No way contact my Elders. Biggens need names for everything."

Pinecone nodded. "Yes, Biggens name all things. I watch you on Biggen viewer." She pointed to her flatpanel with her tail. "Friend brave. Biggen martin hunt Friend. Friend fight Biggen martin. Friend defeat Biggen martin. Friend spare Biggen martin, no kill."

“No, I no kill Biggen martin. My people rule, you kill, you eat. I no want eat Biggen martin. Too big. Biggen martin and Friend now friends.”

Pinecone’s eyes shot wide again.

Aldin switched to Common/Biggenspeak. “I had tricked him into attacking me to prove to other Biggens that I am not a dumb animal. Going back to Biggens having names for everything. As you know Biggen have more words than chitterspeak. I just go by Aldin/Friend unless I’m performing my job as Ambassador. Ambassador means I am the representative for my people.”

“Voice of Elders?” she inquired in chitterspeak.

Aldin paused a moment. “Yes, that is a good description. I speak on behalf of my Elders.” He drooped his tail. “It’s hard to do so as I have no way to contact them.”

Pinecone drooped her tail and typed quickly on her flatpanel. Again, the blind reader spoke her message. “Pinecone knows what like be alone. So sorry for All-den.”

Raoul looked about in the tree canopy. “I’m afraid to ask this, Pinecone.”

“What Elder Curious fear?” Pinecone responded in chitterspeak.

“Did you and Twig become mates or did he flee like the other before?”

Pinecone gigglechattered and typed quickly on her flatpanel. “Twig is good mate. We raise two litters of strong pups. Pups all in own territories now to sunrise outside of Biggen territory. Twig isn’t here because he’s afraid of Biggen strangers. He is not afraid of our Biggen neighbors, Kind, Sunshine, and their pup, Energy. It confuses him like it did me at first how Biggen pups take so long to grow.” Pinecone smiled and typed some more. “As I told Elder Curious last time, I helped him learn. But he still fears how I learn hear and read Biggenspeak and make flatpanel speak Biggenspeak for me. He hear/understand some Biggenspeak.”

“Perhaps your mate would be less afraid if he meets me first, Pinecone,” Aldin suggested. “It’s not like I can help the ‘Biggens’ much in moving their things into the guest room. As for me, all I’ve got is my own flatpanel.” He tapped it with his tail where it rested on his back attached to his fur.

“That’s a great idea,” Raoul replied, “provided Pinecone thinks it would help. She knows her mate best, of course.”

Pinecone thought about it a moment. She slung her flatpanel onto her back, where it stuck to her fur as it was designed to do. “Come,” she squeaked to Aldin and darted up the tree. He followed.