

EIGHT

“And that’s the basics for Terran-style pizza. Bake at 4...um. Sorry, I was about to give you the Terran temperature.” Aldin paused for a moment making a quick calculation in his head. “Bake at 200 for 30 to 35 ceklicks.” Aldin slipped the one he made demonstrating the process into the commercial oven. His tail wigwagged a moment. “It might cook a little faster in this type of oven. We’ll need to keep an eye on it.”

Aldin’s student was a male tassel-eared citizen squirrel with tawny brown mixed in with salt pepper gray fur. He finished-up his own pizza creation and slipped it into the large oven next to Aldin’s. “I can’t thank you enough, Ambassador.”

“You’re welcome, Jochen, and I hope it takes off for you. If it does, you need to thank your cousin, Aouphril. She’s the one who persuaded me to meet with you and discuss this partnership.”

“Well, I had attempted to make pizza on my own based on her description of the ones you’ve done for her and Orlan. While it more or less worked, I knew it wasn’t right. I now know what I was doing wrong.”

“And the choice in toppings could be near endless.” The scent of cooking pizza filled the restaurant kitchen. “There’s one thing I have a hard time with though.”

“What’s that Ambassador?”

“Terran tomatoes are red.”

“Seriously? They’re not purple?”

“They taste the same, but, yes, different color. If there were others from Terra here, they might be confused by the strange color.”

“So, what are your proposed terms?”

Aldin tapped an icon on his flatpanel sending a legal document onto Jochen’s. “I’ve retained Mustelid Law Firm in Forestdale, Alisferil as my legal counsel. I recommend you have your legal counsel read through this before you sign. In brief summary, I receive one percent in royalty fees. I understand that your margins in the restaurant business aren’t very large to begin with and it’s not like I’m doing the work.”

“That’s very generous of you, Ambassador. Most franchises charge ten times that.”

Aldin shrugged. “I’m a smart cousin squirrel who can just as easily live off the land as live in a home like other citizens. I have little need for credits beyond the travelling I do when not on Ambassador business, like this meeting with you. So, I don’t need to be greedy in partnerships like this.”

“I will take your recommendation and have my counsel review before I sign.”

The timer chimed and they pulled their pizzas out of the oven. They let them cool a bit before cutting them into triangular pieces and digging in. Jochen’s face lit-up in pure delight. “This is incredible,” he mumbled between mouthfuls. “Aouphril wasn’t exaggerating in her description.”

Aldin nibbled on his and simply nodded back at the larger squirrel. “She and Orlan are opening their location near Nadowahoc College in Northeastern Hills Region in in about 2 weeks. Unlike you, she didn’t already have a restaurant to start with.”

“I suspect they’ll do well with hungry college students.” Jochen managed between bites of pizza. “Thank you, again, Ambassador. I think this will be a hit addition to our menu.”

A klick later, Aldin standing in front of a door, reached-up on tippy toes, and pressed the buzzer. A bobcat answered, looked about and then down. Aldin did his best to suppress the fear that welled-up inside him at the sight of the large female predator. Instead, he bowed.

“Hello, Representative Larel. As promised, I have stopped by while in the area.”

“Ambassador? Please come in. Today’s afternoon video session will be starting in just 25 ceklicks. You might be needed.”

Aldin raised an eyebrow but followed the bobcat into her home as asked. She led him into an office space with a large flatpanel on the wall. Small images of various representatives could be seen in some small square sections of the panel. Other squares were black. A purple x over a purple microphone in the corner indicated they were muted.

“Do you know why I may be needed?”

Larel sighed. “It’s not my place to say. But your arrival here will save us some time.”

Aldin nodded, looked at the camera and waved. Several of the representatives, including Dr. Butternut Gowandle, Raoul’s wife, waved back.

The time went by quickly as more and more of the black squares disappeared and were replaced with the faces of representatives. Their name and region appeared in tiny print in their little screen squares. The session was called to order by a lemur, the appointed Chancellor for the session. When the Chancellor or anyone spoke, their muzzle filled the right-half of the screen.

“Wonderful, I see that Ambassador Aldin is with Representative Larel,” the lemur said. “That saves us time in needing to summon you.”

“Yes, Chancellor, I am here with Larel, Representative of the Lakes and Forest District. I just arrived about 25 ceklicks ago. She said that I might be needed. How may I be of service?”

“A side argument occurred this morning between the Representatives of Northeast Hills Region and Cussock Mountains Region over whether or not wild cousin squirrels are sentient.”

“Before you go any further, Chancellor, I must provide full disclosure. Parliament needs to know that Dr. Butternut Gowandle, Representative of the Northeast Hills Region, saved my life this past spring by providing me a blood transfusion. Since that time, she has been trying to win my heart to join her and her spouse as a third member of their marriage. She has been doing so as by the tradition of her people, we are mates as we’ve shared blood. That’s not the tradition of my people. I’m aware she lived among wild cousin squirrels for six years. She is probably as knowledgeable, possibly more so, than her spouse as to the nature of your wild cousin squirrels.”

The lemur nodded. “So, noted. Despite that, what is your feeling on wild cousin squirrels?”

“The interactions I’ve had with them to date have not been interactions with dumb, wild animals, Chancellor. They are intelligent. One tried to choose me as her mate this past winter. They call you ‘Biggens’ in their language. I think it’s big ones mashed together. Once the college graduate students with me intervened and we got that female to understand I’m a ‘small Biggen,’” Aldin made quote marks with his claws, “she told us she claimed the territory we found her in after she fled south for several days after her brother was killed by a predator. Squirrel chitterspeak isn’t as,” Aldin hesitated for a moment trying to come-up with the right word, “robust a language as Common. However, what she said was more than one would expect from a dumb animal. You may recall that during the previous Parliament I took the oath of citizenship and declared my species as ‘smart cousin squirrel.’ I went with that as I’m not citizen squirrel-size. I’m the size of a wild cousin. However, unlike your wild cousins, I learned to speak Common and have the vocal cords to speak it. Your wild cousins can’t speak Common as they don’t seem to have the vocal cords for it.

“Representative Gowandle’s spouse is currently working on a documentary that will show that your wild cousin squirrels are intelligent and self-aware. They are not just dumb animals.” Aldin could see many of the representatives on screen were mumbling to themselves. As they were muted, he could not hear what they were saying. “But don’t take my word for it. Why don’t you try and ask them yourselves.”

A wolf raised his hand and was recognized by the Chancellor. The wolf’s muzzle replaced the Chancellor’s, much as Aldin’s appeared on others’ screens when he was talking. “I am Carles, Representative of the Acadian Valley Region. Ambassador, how do you propose we ask this of wild cousin squirrels? If you’re lucky enough to see one, it flees as soon as it spots you.”

“Do you blame them, Representative Carles? All of you are bigger and you could be out to hunt them. That’s in the general sense of you. I’m not accusing you in particular of hunting them, Representative Carles. I recently met one who may be willing to come and answer questions on video. It may take a few days to convince her to come. However, I think she’ll do so.”

“We can summon her,” Carles responded.

Aldin twitched his tail as he replied. “You can try, Representative, but she may choose to ignore it. She is not a citizen and isn’t obligated to respond to your summons. And unless you’ve already decided she’s sentient, why would you attempt to summon a ‘dumb animal’ that is still hunted in some Regions?” Aldin looked about to try and indicate he’d be looking all about the chamber if this were a face-to-face session. “You do realize, that will need to stop if she convinces you she’s sentient like everyone in this Parliament. It would be immoral to continue hunting a fellow intelligent creature.”

Multiple hands rose across the screen. The Chancellor seemed to stare for a moment. “I’ve received multiple requests to move to a face-to-face session to discuss this further. Parliament will reconvene in the Parliament Chamber in the Capital Region in four days. Do your best to bring the wild cousin before Parliament, Ambassador.” The lemur ended the session and the flat panel went dark.

Aldin drooped his tail as he looked up again at the giant (to him) bobcat. “Thank you for sharing your space with me, Larel. I need to go try and do as the Chancellor has requested.”

“Do you think this wild cousin squirrel you speak of will come?”

“It would have been easier to convince her to attend through video. An in-person session with a large group of what she’ll view as large predators may not be so easy to make happen. That may be more to ask for than she can handle.”