

TEN

At the flitterport, Pinecone kept close to Aldin and Raoul. There were Biggens everywhere, both prey and predator. She saw none of the Biggen predators made any threatening moves towards Biggen prey. They talked together in friendly ways. If a Biggen predator or prey moved towards their group, Aldin bounded over to quietly talk to them and shake paws. They'd look past him at her and back at him, nodding and backing off giving her and Raoul space. She was still very, very scared, leaving wet pawprints as they went. It was so hard to not flee up a wall and cry-out a warning. It was only because Raoul and Aldin were there and showed no fear that she could barely keep in control. She thought that if Twig had come along, he would have been up a wall as soon as they saw another Biggen. If that had happened, he'd have cried-out and she would have been quickly up a wall with him too scared to move. They would have had to travel in a cage to feel safe. She didn't want to travel in a cage. She wanted the Biggens to see she wasn't scared of them, though deep down, she was very scared.

"Now for what will be the hardest thing for you, Pinecone. We leave Raoul here and get on the big Biggen flyer, called a flitter. Raoul will be taking a different one as Parliament meets in a different territory from his home. Biggen elder bobcat, Larel, will meet us on the flitter. It will be just the three of us and the flitter crew. As an elder, Larel made those arrangements to try and make it easier for you. She'll keep as far as she can from you on the flight unless you choose to approach her. She understands you will be scared of her."

Pinecone hugged Raoul and then followed Aldin down a tunnel into the flitter. She could smell the bobcat in the tunnel. She must have already gone down the tunnel to this flitter thing. She chattered nervously, but proceeded to follow Aldin down the tunnel. She could also smell otter and beaver. That must be the 'flight crew' Aldin talked about.

They arrived at an opening and a Biggen beaver stood there and greeted them. "Welcome aboard, Ambassador and special guest, Pinecone. I am Dauvid and will be your steward on this flight." The beaver scooted down on all four paws to try and make himself look smaller. "I understand if you need to sniff me, m'am."

"Dauvid's job is to make sure we are comfortable. If we need food or water, ask and he'll bring it to us."

Pinecone nodded and sniffed Dauvid trying to assure herself he was no threat to her as Aldin had tried to teach her on the hovercraft flight to the flitterport. When she finished, she pulled the flatpanel off her back and quickly typed into it. It spoke for her. "Thank you, Daw-vid." She slung it back on her back as the beaver stood back up and smiled.

"This way. As soon as you're buckled up, we'll take off." Dauvid lead them to Biggen pup-size seats with a window view. He demonstrated to them how the safety harness worked. He pointed to the purple lights overhead in front of each seat. "When the light is on you need to get into your harness."

Pinecone wigwagged her tail nervously. Aldin squeezed her forepaw gentle. “We only must be ‘trapped’ as the flitter takes off and prepares to land.” He looked about and turned again to Dauvid. “Where is Representative Larel?”

“She chose to be in the other room to give our special guest space.”

“Thank you.”

The beaver nodded and went to his own seat, buckled in and sent a message to the cockpit that the passengers were ready. As he did this, Pinecone followed Aldin’s lead and buckled in. She was scared, but saw that Aldin wasn’t, so, it must be safe. She felt everything around her lurch a little as the flitter’s engines started to spin-up.

A female voice came over the speaker, “Good morning! This is Charlos. I am your pilot for this flight. Welcome aboard. We should have clear weather on this six-klick flight to the capital district. As soon as we reach cruising height, I’ll turn off the harness signs and you can move about the cabin as you wish. I am honored to serve as your pilot today. Here we go.”

The flitter’s engines started to whine loudly and then the noise seemed to quiet down. Aldin pointed out the window next to them as the ground fell away. Pinecone stared in wonder at how quickly they rose into the sky.

“We fly higher than predator birds!” she chittered in wonder as she stared out the window.

“And faster too,” Aldin responded as the flitter broke through the cloud deck and leveled off.

The harness signs turned off. Aldin unbuckled his restraints and Pinecone did likewise. She turned in her seat and put both forepaws on the window edge and stared out the window in fascination. Any fear she had before about getting on the flitter were gone.

Dauvid approached from an angle that ensured she’d see him. He kept back a way waiting for her to look towards him. He bowed slightly. “This will be a long flight, m’am. When you grow hungry or thirsty let me know. Otherwise, I will leave you alone.”

“Thank you,” she chittered and Aldin translated. Dauvid did a quick head nod again and headed aft to the other cabin.

“If you think you’ll be alright alone for a little while, I’m going to go talk to Larel for a moment.”

Pinecone nervously wigwagged her tail briefly glancing at him and chittered, “She no hunt you?”

Aldin gigglechittered responding in chitterspeak, “Bobcat elder no hunt me. Is forbidden and we friends.”

She nodded still staring out the window. “I meet elder bobcat later.”

He switched back to Common. “Are you sure you want to do that, Pinecone?”

Pinecone turned back to him away from the window, giving him her full attention, pulling her flatpanel off her back, typing away as the blind reader repeated her written words. “I must meet Representative Larel, All-din. I must try and put what you taught me in the hovercraft to practice. I need to become like a small Biggen to handle being in the Parliament chamber surrounded by Biggen predators. I must learn to fight down the urge to flee if I am to speak to the Biggen elders. How can I do that if I don’t try? Is better I try first with Larel. If I can’t face her alone, how will I face a room full of Biggen predators?”

Aldin nodded. “You are already very brave, Pinecone, to come this far. I’ll let Larel know you wish to meet her. When you’re ready we can either go back to her cabin or she can come out here.”

Pinecone thanked him and turned back to the window and stared down at the clouds and the land far below. *What am I getting myself into?* she wondered to herself. Part of her wished Twig had come.

“You’re leaving pawprints, Ms. Pinecone. Are you sure you wish to get any closer?”

Pinecone froze for a moment staring at the Biggen bobcat. The predator was large enough that she could swallow her in a single gulp if she leapt at her just then. She did her best to push off the thought and fear as she chattered and Aldin translated word for word. “As I say to Friend, I must try, Elder Bobcat. If no do this, I can no face Elders in elder meeting place.”

Aldin then added, “She can’t pause to pull her flatpanel around and use it to talk, Larel. Basically, she means, As I said to Aldin, I must try, Representative Larel. If I can’t face you alone, how can I face all of Parliament in the chamber?”

Pinecone nodded and moved a little closer while her tail stood straight up her back, occasionally wigwagging on its own. She fought down the urge to chatter a warning. Her mind kept screaming at her to flee while she still could. But Aldin stood his ground and didn’t respond to her warning chatter. If he wasn’t afraid, it must be safe, right? She forced herself to inch closer.

Larel slowly scooted down to make herself look smaller as Aldin had instructed her earlier. “You don’t need to force yourself all the way on this first try, Ms. Pinecone. We still have 4 clicks until we land. It would be terrible if the fear you must be feeling caused your heart to burst. Are you really sure you want to push yourself this hard? I can smell your fear.”

The bobcat’s tone was full of worry, not what she expected to hear from a predator. Pinecone moved up within touching distance of Larel. She pulled her flatpanel off her back and typed

rapidly on it and it read her words for her. “Yes, we have 4 more clicks. But I need to do this. May I sniff you, Elder Lawr-el?”

“Yes,” the bobcat replied and held still as the small squirrel did so, her tail whipping about behind her rapidly.

Larel’s scent was similar to a normal bobcat, but also different. Biggins always seemed to smell slightly different from their normal-size cousins. Much to her surprise, she didn’t smell any blood, unlike a normal predator. No matter how much a predator cleaned itself, there was always a lingering scent of blood from their recent kills. Was what Aldin said earlier true? Biggen predators didn’t hunt Biggen prey? Or she hadn’t hunted recently.

Pinecone typed again. “May we hug?”

“If you feel up to it, yes.” Larel slowly sat-up and held her arms out. Pinecone set her flatpanel aside and accepted the embrace, hugging back gently. Larel could feel the tiny squirrel’s heart racing. She released the squirrel.

Pinecone scooped her flatpanel up and typed again, slinging it onto her back before it could finish reading her words. “Thank you. I need to be alone awhile.” She fled back into the other cabin but held down the urge to cry warning until the door closed behind her. Larel heard it through the closed door.

Larel looked to Aldin. “You’re not reacting to her warning cries, Ambassador.”

Aldin partially pulled an earbud out of one ear. “Something I learned some time ago. I now use these when I interact with cousin squirrels. They’re programmed to noise cancel warning screeches. Otherwise, I would have instinctually fled due to her warning cries adding my own to hers. She did better than I expected on her first try. Thank you for your willingness to assist.”

“The pleasure is mine. I never thought wild cousins were sentient before the argument in Parliament. Pinecone obviously is. Nor did I ever believe I’d get to hug a wild cousin squirrel. My late father would be upset with me for ‘letting dinner’ go.” Larel shuddered. “He taught me to hunt as a survival skill. I hated it. The thought of taking another’s life sickens me, Ambassador. I remember when former Chancellor Mara opened up to you about her experience learning to hunt.”

“You know about that?”

“Yes, that encounter was not private. She shared it with all of Parliament. As those emergency sessions were aired live on all channels for all citizens to watch, I saw it. Her sharing of the trauma she experienced helped me and I’m sure many others who experienced the same feelings. It is also why I never viewed you as a wild cousin squirrel. Those sessions when you first arrived proved to me you aren’t from our world as you have said. But I know of some who still don’t believe.”