

ELEVEN

Dauvid kept his distance from Pinecone as she perched herself on top of one of the seatbacks in the cabin as far from the rear cabin door as she could get. She quietly screeed a warning of predator while staring out one of the windows and also keeping an eye on the cabin door. Instinct told her to climb. She couldn't climb any higher inside the Biggen flyer and they were higher in the sky than any tree. After a while, Aldin came back into the front cabin. She saw Larel behind him briefly before the door closed. She let out another warning scree. Much to her surprise, Aldin didn't react to it. The fact he remained calm helped her to get over the fear and settle down, moving back down into the seat proper.

"Dauvid, I think it's time we have a little food and water, say either some fruit or nuts."

"Yes, Ambassador. Give me a couple ceklicks and I'll have it right up for both of you." Dauvid made his way to the aft cabin to see if Larel needed anything.

Aldin turned to Pinecone. "You did better than I expect on your first try. Representative Larel is willing to talk by flatpanel if you want to talk for a while. Later, if you want to have another round of facing her, she's willing to do so again."

Pinecone typed on her flatpanel. "That was so hard, Al-den. How do you handle it so well? And you didn't flee with me as I warning screeed."

"I have had lots of practice in the past year or so, Pinecone. If you hadn't been concentrating so hard, you would have noticed I left light pawprints. Larel may be a friend, but my instincts, like yours, were screaming 'Predator! Flee!' all along. It can be difficult. As to how I did not react to your warning screees, as I told Larel," he partially pulled one of the earbuds out. "Biggens have lots of neat tools. These block me from hearing those screees."

Dauvid arrived with water and what looked something like Terran cherries, except they were bright yellow.

"Cherries!" Pinecone exclaimed in chitterspeak. She typed in her flatpanel. "Thank you, Dawvid. I love cherries!"

"The pleasure is mine, ma'm. Enjoy." He bowed and pushed a cart towards the aft cabin.

"Cherries?" Aldin responded in chitterspeak. He sniffed one and nibbled. His eyes grew wide. "They are cherries."

They both nibbled for a while. Pinecone gigglechittered before typing. "Al-den no have cherries before?"

Aldin listened carefully to the Common word and repeated it a couple times to better remember it before responding. "No, I didn't know if they existed here or what they were called. We had

them back on Terra, but ours were red and tart.” He puckered his mouth a bit on the last part. “But still good. These are sweeter.”

“There is only one cherry tree near my territory. Kind and family enjoy them. I get a few, but they rot too quick. Twig loves them too.” She drooped her tail as she typed that last part. “I wish he came along but understand why he refused.” She sighed and then typed some more. “We’ll eat and rest a little while. Then, I’ll talk to Larel over the flatpanel. After that, I will face her again. Before you ask, as I said before I must keep trying. If I can’t fight down the fear facing her alone, I won’t be able to face the other Elders unless I am in a cage. I don’t want to be in a cage.”

Aldin nodded and nibbled another cherry.

Once she had calmed down, Pinecone did talk to Larel via flatpanel briefly, before working up the courage to go see her muzzle-to-muzzle again. Pinecone insisted on doing so without Aldin. She sat a little distance from Larel. The bobcat talked about how her father had taught her to hunt when she was half-grown. She explained how she hunted a wild cousin rabbit and it had sickened her to take its life to please her father. She carefully didn’t go into detail of how she killed and then ate the rabbit. She did say she never hunted again after that. There were tears in her eyes as she finished as she looked at the wild cousin squirrel. “I know I scare you, Ms. Pinecone, but I would never harm you. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I did.”

Pinecone offered to hug her again and tried to comfort the large predator as she cried into the little squirrel’s shoulder. Pinecone gently scratched the Biggen predator on the back of the neck as she cried into her shoulder trying to give her reassuring chitters as she had done in the past for her pups when they were upset. After a while they released each other’s grip and pulled back. Pinecone typed into her flatpanel for it to read for her. “You call me brave, Elder Larel. You are just as brave to share such a terrible memory with me.” Her tail wigwagged wildly behind her. “Thank you for sharing it with me. But I need to be alone again for a while.”

Larel nodded as she wiped the last of the tears out of her eyes as the wild cousin squirrel again fled to the front cabin. For the briefest moment, Larel felt the urge to give chase as she had done to that rabbit so long before. Fresh tears burst forth and she buried her face in her forepaws.

Pinecone would meet Larel two more times on the flight. In that final meeting, she was able to tolerate being close to her like she was Raoul. Her tail still betrayed she was scared, but she did not flee and barely left wet pawprints on the floor. Aldin praised her on her progress.

The fasten harness signs lit as the pilot’s voice came from the speakers. “This is your pilot, Charlos, we are just 15 cekklicks out from our landing point. Please strap in.”

Pinecone moved to a child-size seat near Larel and proceeded to buckle-up. She reached over with her tiny forepaws and squeezed one of the bobcat's in reassurance as she looked up eye-to-eye with her. Larel raised one eyelid briefly before buckling-up herself. Aldin glanced over at Pinecone as he got into the seat next to her and proceeded to buckle-up. Pinecone typed into her flatpanel. "Another test of myself, Al-den and Elder Larel. We will see how I handle being near you for the rest of the flight. I know I am safe here and you will not hunt me, though my instincts are still telling me to flee. I'm going to watch out the window for the rest of our trip down." She tucked the flatpanel away on her back and looked out the window as the flitter started to drop through the clouds. She was still amazed at how high up and fast the Biggen flyer flew.