

TWELVE

Pinecone hugged Dauvid in thanks. She did likewise for the giant biggin otter pilot who came back to meet the passengers after their landing. Charlos was delighted to meet the wild cousin squirrel. Likewise, for having piloted for Aldin and Representative Larel. The bobcat walked up the tunnel leading from the flitter to the flitterport and the two squirrels bounded close behind her. As they emerged, a voice familiar to Aldin called out.

“Aldin, over here!”

Aldin looked in the direction of the voice to see Butternut waving. Aldin led Pinecone over to her. Larel followed. Butternut’s tail began to wigwag nervously.

Larel kept back a little and bowed. “Hello, Representative Butternut. I had a hard time believing what you claimed over the video sessions. It is hard to tell how big or small an individual is in front of a camera. Now with my own eyes, I see it’s true. You are a cousin squirrel.”

Butternut’s tail continued to wigwag nervously. “I’ve told the tale in Parliament, Representative Larel, as unbelievable as it may be to some. I’m not looking forward to our face-to-face session. I know I’m going to have a hard time keeping the fear down.” She looked towards Pinecone who seemed to be as calm as Aldin near the large bobcat. “However, our special visitor seems to be able to handle being near you better than me. Pinecone must be a better student of Aldin’s than I’ve been.”

Pinecone slid the flatpanel off her back and typed quickly. “Aldin is a good teacher, Representative Butternut. I had little choice as I was in a flitter for 6 klicks with Representative Larel. She can tell you how scared I was the first few meetings on the flight.” She looked towards the bobcat. “Thank you again, Representative Larel, for helping me. I’ll see you in a few days when Parliament meets.”

Larel bowed and headed off through the flitterport. Pinecone again looked towards Butternut and gazed at her reddish-brown mixed with peppery gray fur and her tasseled ears. She typed in her flatpanel and it read her words. “You look different from squirrels my forest, Elder Butternut. Different fur color. Extra fur like pine tassels in your ears. I like it.” She then added in chitter, “Curious say you, he mates.”

Butternut nodded. “Yes, Raoul/Curious and I are mates, Pinecone.”

“But you no can make pups.”

Butternut drooped her tail. “No, we no can make pups.” She responded in chitterspeak before switching to Common. “But we have loved each other dearly, even before my accident. Sometimes, you choose your mate for that rather than to start a family.”

Pinecone typed into her panel. “I’m sorry, Butternut. I didn’t mean to hurt you. Curious is good friend. I’m just surprised he mate to a squirrel. He must love you dearly. I can see why. I think

your fur color and your ears make you...” Pinecone hesitated a moment trying to think of the Biggen term, “attractive? Pretty? I don’t know if that is the right word.”

“Yes, that is close enough. Thank you for the complement.”

Pinecone drooped her tail as she typed more. “You must miss him being here. I miss my mate. He doesn’t trust Biggens. He wouldn’t come along.”

“He put me in charge of protecting her, Butternut. He threatened to bite me hard if I don’t bring her back safe after this meeting.”

Butternut arched an eyebrow. “Having lived among wild cousins for several years before you brought me back to Raoul, Aldin, that’s a very serious threat. He’s entrusted you with keeping his mate safe or he’ll neuter you.”

Aldin’s eyes briefly shot wide enough to show the whites before he shuddered at the thought. He turned to Pinecone. “Why didn’t you explain what he meant to me, Pinecone? I’d have never let you meet alone with Larel as you insisted. As much as I know she was no threat, I didn’t realize how serious a threat your mate had made to me.”

Pinecone shrugged like a Biggen would before typing. “You look and smell like other squirrels. You can chitterspeak like other squirrels. You eat like we do. You told me what it’s like in your colony. It’s not much different, really. So, I assumed you would understand what he meant when he threatened to bite you hard.” She paused a moment and yawned. “I’ll need sleep soon.”

“You’ll be staying with me,” Butternut stated. “Come it’s not far from here once we get to a hovercraft.”

Someone gently nudged him. Then someone else also did so from his other side. Aldin slowly stirred awake as the other two squirrels gigglechattered. They nudged him again simultaneously.

“Morning, sleepyhead,” Butternut chided him.

Pinecone gigglechattered from his other side as she gently nudged him a third time. “Friend sleep late. Sunrise long ago.

Aldin uncurled and yawned and blinked a few times. “Sorry, Flitter-lag. Always hits me like that.” He looked again at Pinecone. “You didn’t oversleep, too?”

“Some, no like Friend. I wake, go eat, and speak Elder Butternut. Why you no speak you Butternut mate?”

Aldin sighed. "My people are different, Pinecone. Butternut saved my life by giving me some of her blood. I know that is the rule among your people. To my people that doesn't make us mates. We are only mates if we 'try make pups'." He glanced from Pinenut to Butternut and back to Pinenut. "Butternut already has a mate. I will not get in between her and Raoul/Curious. They are good friends to me. After saving my life, I wouldn't be much of a friend if I ruined that between them." He then gave his full attention to Butternut. "I know you keep trying to attract me and bring me in as a second mate, Butternut. I'm not ready for that commitment. I've watched Raoul's body language. He may not admit it to you because he loves you enough to let you have your way, even if it hurts him. I really think he is afraid he'll lose you to me if I join the two of you. I don't think he's anymore ready for a three-way marriage than I am. You and Raoul will always be close to me."

Butternut drooped her tail briefly and simply nodded. "As Pinecone agrees, by the custom of cousin squirrels, we are mates, though I know it's not the way of your people. Please forgive me if I keep trying to win you over your way, Aldin." She hugged him briefly and he returned the embrace. She quickly changed subjects. "Come, we saved you some breakfast. Then we can show our guest around the area as we have a few days before Parliament is in session again."

Pinecone hesitated a moment rather than follow Butternut. She turned to Aldin. "I..."

Aldin shushed her. "You live with Biggens who are more like big squirrels as you say. Butternut and I look like squirrels. Still part Biggens. Mating can be a touchy subject among Biggens. It can be like how Twig feels about Biggens. You don't need to apologize. You just didn't know."

She hugged him in thanks and bounded after Butternut. Aldin followed behind into the other room. He chose not to admit he enjoyed having the two of them snuggled with him overnight. He hadn't experienced that since he had arrived on this new Earth. He had forgotten how safe and reassuring it felt to share a nest with other squirrels. It was the most restful he had felt in the year plus he'd been in this new world. At the same time, it made him nervous. Would it be that easy for Butternut to win him over? Just keep inviting him into bed with her. Would Raoul accept that? Perhaps with Butternut snuggled down between the two of them? Things to ponder later. Right now, he was hungry.