

FIFTEEN

Pinecone cried herself out before Parliament resumed. Upon being recognized again by the Chancellor, she again asked those assembled if they had further questions of her. None were asked, so she surrendered the visitor's circle and sat down where she was told to do so near Aldin. He briefly squeezed one of her forepaws reassuringly and whispered to her how brave she was.

"The Representative of the Cussock Mountains Region is recognized."

A fox dressed in a business suit made his way to the floor. He bowed to the Chancellor, "Thank you, Chancellor." He bowed towards Pinecone and smiled, "and thank you to our visitor, Pinecone." He then looked out into the chamber and made eye contact with Butternut. "And I must express my apologies to the Representative of the Northeastern Hills Region for doubting your claims."

Butternut responded, "Your apology is accepted, Representative Talnoir."

Talnoir nodded again. "My fellow Representatives. Pinecone is but one wild cousin squirrel. For all we know she was trained to say these things to us." Pinecone bristled where she sat. Aldin again squeezed her forepaw reassuringly. "As she stated herself, she has known Representative Butternut's husband for several years. In addition, by our own rules and proceedings, when possible, we need to obtain statements and facts from at least three sources. While it is obvious that Ms. Pinecone is sentient, that may not apply to all wild cousin squirrels. I propose we bring forward a few more to question."

Several representatives raised their hands. The chancellor pointed to Carles, the wolf representing the Acadian Valley Region. He stood in place and asked, "Representative Talnoir, just how do you propose we do that? We were fortunate, that Ambassador Aldin knew of Pinecone and was able to convince her to come before us."

Talnoir bowed again. "An excellent question, Representative Carles. I have been pondering it myself since Pinecone first spoke. The easy route would be to reach out to various wild cousin rehabbers and see if any have wild cousin squirrels in their care that could be brought forward to us to question. I've pushed that idea aside because there is the potential that the rehabbers have already influenced those wild cousin squirrels. I think we will have to capture some to bring before us."

The chamber erupted in protests and counterprotests before Talnoir could continue. The Chancellor hammered his gavel trying to bring things under control. A high-pitched whistle pierced through the chamber causing many to grab onto their ears and all to quiet down. The Chancellor and Talnoir were among those who grabbed onto their ears briefly.

Aldin looked towards the Chancellor. "My apologies, Chancellor and Representative Talnoir, for interrupting." He then looked about the chamber. "I can be louder if needed." He sat back down next to Pinecone.

Talnoir continued as if he hadn't been interrupted. "If those we bring forward talk to us and tell a similar origin tale to that which Pinecone spoke, I'll accept that all wild cousin squirrels are sentient as we are. It would show that Pinecone isn't unique. I surrender the floor."

More hands shot-up, but there wasn't the disruptions that had occurred previously. Many spoke for and against the proposal. Two clicks went by as nearly all had their say. Once all spoke who wished to, Aldin raised his forepaw and was recognized. "Other than to whistle you back under control, I have stayed out of your discussion on this issue up to this point as I am not a Representative. However, I still feel I need to speak on this as an observer watching and listening to you. Have you listened to each other and thought through what you are proposing? How would you react, if it was your spouse or child that was kidnapped and taken someplace you don't know? Or maybe if it was you being dragged away from your loved ones? That's what you're proposing to do. If you follow through with this proposal, it will cause great trauma to those you propose to capture and bring here. Some may be injured or killed in the process. Surely, there must be a better way." He turned to the Chancellor. "Thank you, Chancellor. I yield the floor."

Before debate could erupt anew from Aldin's warning, Pinecone immediately stepped forward into the Visitor's Circle. All fell silent. She rapidly typed on her flatpanel and the blind reader spoke what she typed as she shed tears. "Biggen Elders...Biggen Representatives, I plead with you. Please don't do this. Try asking first. If you do not wish to speak to squirrels being cared for by your healers...your ree-hah-bill-e-tat-ors, then send out Biggen squirrels who chitterspeak well into the forests you know my kind live in. Have them call out asking to speak to an Elder. Our Elders are not like you. They are not chosen at random to serve for two seasons and then go back to their normal lives. As explained to me by my dame..mother, an Elder is a squirrel who has survived many seasons. As they have survived, they are viewed as being wise with much knowledge. Others turn to them to settle disputes. They may flee just as any other squirrel, but maybe they'll respond to a request to speak, Elder to Elder. Please don't go trap my kind just because I told you our origin story as it was told to me by my mother and her mother before her. I came here because you asked. If I had known it would lead to this, I would have listened my mate's warnings not to come and stayed in my territory. If you follow through with this, it will only prove why we always warn our pups to 'No trust Biggens!'" Her tail wigwagged back and forth in distress. "I yield the floor." She bounded back next to Aldin.

Pinecone's proposal triggered a new round of debate that went into the late afternoon. The vote was barely in favor of trying to find wild cousin squirrel Elders and ask them. How to do so was quickly resolved by Butternut who directed them to her husband who could recruit current and past students to assist, many of whom were back in their home regions and districts. It was agreed upon. Parliament would reconvene as soon as contact was either successfully made or all asked to help tried and failed.