

TWENTY-ONE

At the Elder's tail gesturing, Butternut guided Pinecone over to the Biggen squirrel-size hammock that served as his nest in the hospital room. She snuggled down with the grieving squirrel. Soon, both were fast asleep. The Elder turned to Aldin.

"Curious and I talk. Talk lot. Little else can do while wait/heal. Talk or sleep. Talk more interesting. Butternut, Curious mates. Curious tell me Friend sick near death. Biggen healer take blood from Butternut and put in Friend. Butternut blood save Friend's life."

"Yes, Elder."

"Friend, Butternut share blood. Friend, Butternut mates. Curious, Friend now like litter mates. Both Butternut mates."

Aldin wigwagged his tail left to right. "No, Elder, I no Butternut mate."

"Curious explain how Friend's people different. Live in colony. Share big territory. Friend no there. Friend here. Rule here different. Curious say you see eight winters. I see ten. Biggen healer let me see eleven. Make me Elder to Friend. Friend must listen. Friend join Biggens. Friend call self, smart squirrel when join Biggens. If Friend smart squirrel, Friend must obey smart squirrel rule: you share blood or try make pups, you mates. Friend, Butternut share blood. Friend, Butternut mates." The Elder squirrel shook his head. "Now Friend, Pinecone soon mates."

"What!?! " Aldin exclaimed in Common as his tail wigwagged about in panic. Raoul translated the exclamation.

"You hear Pinecone mate..."

"Twig."

"Twig speak as die. Speak: 'Friend now care for you.' Twig choose you replace Twig as Pinecone mate. Pinecone mourn Twig now. Pinecone will heal. Pinecone then choose Friend as new mate." The Elder shook his head again. "Twig no know Friend, Butternut mates. Is problem. Butternut, Pinecone may fight."

Aldin continued to wigwag his tail in near panic and looked towards Raoul for help.

Raoul held-up his hands. "Friend know how Curious feel." He looked towards the Elder. "Butternut was Biggen squirrel. Accident change her to smart squirrel. Butternut know smart squirrel rule: Share blood or try make pups, mates. Butternut, Curious share blood and try make pups. We try make pups before accident change Butternut from Biggen to smart squirrel. We share blood and try make pups again after she return from forest to show we still mates. Butternut, Curious mates. Friend our friend. Get very sick. Sick sleep near death. Need share blood or Friend die. I ask Butternut share blood. She scared share blood. Fear Friend make her

leave me. I ask again. She share blood. Friend heal, wake, and live. Butternut think Friend second mate. Try chose Friend. Try hard. I try help. Friend refuse. Friend close friend, no mate.”

The Elder looked at both of them. “Friend sick sleep when Butternut share blood? Curious no explain when we speak Friend sick sleep when share blood.”

“I sick sleep, Elder,” Aldin added. “I no know blood share at time. I sleep near death.”

The Elder closed his eyes. “That different. Friend no choose share blood. Butternut, Friend no mates.”

Aldin visibly relaxed at the pronouncement. “Thank the Spirit,” he mumbled quietly in English.

The Elder looked at him strangely.

“Our Biggens different, Elder. Speak different Biggenspeak. I express thanks to Creator that I and Butternut no mates. Biggen Elders send me all over world. I no stay in home territory long. I no around to help raise pups. I no make good sire/mate. Is why I no want mate.”

Raoul added, “As we speak before, Elder, Friend’s people only mates if try make pups. Butternut wants pups. I no squirrel. I can no make pups with her. Can only try.” Raoul drooped his tail squirrel like. “I know my mate, Elder. She want pups. She no force Friend make pups. If Pinecone chose Friend as mate, I think Butternut no fight.” Raoul shrugged. “Butternut might try choose Elder. She wants pups. You tried to get her choose you before you know she small Biggen. Biggen Elders have spoken. Squirrel and Biggens can now be mates.”

The Elder wigwagged his tail a bit on that last part. “Good. Butternut, Pinecone must no fight. Butternut Biggen Elder. Biggen Elders make Pinecone Elder. Is no good if Elders fight. Butternut try choose me, I no fight Curious. You first mate. I only give chase if you say yes. She make good dame.” He yawned. “Many things we must speak.” He yawned again. “Can wait. Sleep now.” He moved towards the hammock bed. “Friend join Butternut, Pinecone, and Elder.”

“I will, Elder. Twig order me protect Pinecone until return or he bite me hard.” He drooped his tail. “He can no bit me hard now if I fail. I no fail Twig. I will protect Pinecone until she return her territory.”

The Elder nodded and turned to Raoul. “Curious, Biggen nest too small or I ask you join us. Is right, you should be with mate sleep time.” The Elder drooped his tail “We see you sunrise?”

“No, Elder, I stay like I have since Biggen squirrel bring you here.” Raoul moved over by the hammock and curled-up on the floor under it. The Elder led Aldin up into the Biggen hammock. They snuggled down with the others and were soon fast asleep.