

TWENTY-TWO

Aldin slowly stirred. Someone gigglechittered and then two someones nuzzled each of his ears. That caused him to snap fully awake. Both Pinecone and Butternut tumbled out of the hammock before he could determine who had nuzzled which ear. The two gigglechittered at his startled look.

Aldin blinked a couple times and rubbed his eyes with the back of his paws. “We’ve been nesting together since the start of the face-to-face Parliament session. And neither of you tried to pull anything like that before now.” He dropped down to the floor, landing with ease on all four paws. He looked about. “Where’s the Elder and Raoul?”

Pinecone pulled her flatpanel off her back and tapped away. “The Elder woke-up early and wanted to go outside and stretch his legs. We joined him and let you sleep. He’s currently being examined by the hedgehog healer...”

“Dr. Territan,” Butternut added in.

Pinecone turned to Butternut and chittered a thanks before continuing. “So, we came back to check on you. Finding you were still asleep and it’s time to get something to eat, we decided to wake you up.” Pinecone scuffed a paw. “It was my idea that if you didn’t wake-up when we got back in the hammock that we’d nuzzle your ears.” She fought back tears a moment. “It always worked to wake...” (sniffle) “Twig.”

Tears started to roll down her muzzle as Butternut went to comfort her again. It only took a couple of ceklicks for her to pull herself together again. She started tapping away again. “I watch message from Jessophat/Kind. I saw the giant owl.” She shuddered. “If Saniel had been alone, Jessophat and Caroline would still be looking for him not knowing he’d been killed and eaten.” She shed a few more tears. “Twig was so brave to save his life.”

Aldin drooped his tail while nodding. “Yes, Twig was very brave to hunt and kill the owl and save Saniel’s life.”

Pinecone tapped away on the flatpanel. “Twig did not trust you, yet did trust you, Aldin. He ordered you to protect me until I return to our territory.” She drooped her tail. “I don’t know when I’ll now return there. Maybe I find a new home in one of the other forests. I release you from that order as he can’t.” A few more tears fell from her eyes, but she held things together.

Was it that easy? Or was he being tested? Aldin slowly wigwagged his tail left to right and back again looking from one female cousin squirrel to the other. “Did the two of you speak with the Elder about me this morning?”

“Yes,” Butternut responded first. “We had a long discussion with the Elder. I will no longer try to get you to chase me unless you show interest first.” She scuffed a paw. “Despite your initial reassurances in that hospital room, I felt obligated to try and win you over. The Elder reassured me that my giving you blood didn’t make us mates.”

Aldin nodded and turned towards Pinecone.

She started tapping away again on her flatpanel. “As I said before Twig did not trust you and did trust you. What he say when he die is...” she paused a moment trying to come-up with the word. “Suggestion. I no try make you chase me unless, as Butternut say, you show interest. I understand you think you would not be a good father/mate because you travel all the time.” She scuffed a paw. “Well, for the coming season at least, I, too will be travelling all the time. We’ll see what comes, yes? Truce for now?”

Aldin agreed to that and hugged both tightly thanking them.

As they pulled apart, the Elder and Raoul entered the room.

“Biggen healer say I can eat soft food. We go to room with food. Come.”

They all went down to the cafeteria where the Elder squirrel nibbled on soft pine nuts with a large smile on his muzzle, while the others ate what they wished.

Over the next two weeks the Elder did discuss many different things with them. He quickly understood the real danger of living among Biggens long. He found their tools useful. He could see why the ancient Elder wanted to keep squirrels from knowing Biggen things. He also felt there were some Biggen tools that could be used to help squirrels without the temptation to join Biggens. One example was the backpack Friend showed him that allowed him to carry things without needing to place them in his mouth. He could carry many more seeds and nuts at one time in it. He suggested to Aldin that they bring squirrel-size backpacks filled with food as gifts to the Elders they visited. Aldin agreed, tapping into a bank account that Parliament had assigned for his and Pinecone’s expenses on their worldwide trip to the various forests to cover the costs after sending off a message to Parliament about the Elder’s suggestion.

Throughout all this, the Elder slowly graduated to slightly harder and harder food until he could eat hard nuts with ease. The Biggen hedgehog healer, Dr. Territan, declared him fully healed two days early.