

TWENTY-FOUR

As Aldin predicted, a whole season nearly passed by as the three of them went from forest to forest passing the news. They were not always welcomed, but they were tolerated thanks to the presence of the former Elder. Roughly half accepted the backpacks. The Elder was amazed at the change in seasons from one side of the world to the other. When they started it was fall harvest time in his home forest. On the other side of the world just weeks later, squirrels were tending to their pups in spring weather.

Much to his disappointment, they never found Aldin's people as he had hoped. Aldin had warned him they would not find his people. Through all this, they rode from place to place on a giant Biggen flyer called a flitter piloted by a Biggen otter named, Charlos. A Biggen beaver, Dauvid, served as their 'steward' providing them food and drink as needed. Pinecone and Friend knew the two Biggens. The Elder began to understand Biggenspeak and grew less nervous around Biggens.

He began to teach Pinecone and Aldin the ways and knowledge of squirrel Elders. Though all this as the weeks went by, he also watched a change in Pinecone and Aldin towards each other. Whether or not they realized it themselves, they grew closer to one another. He smiled happily at his observations of the two without pointing it out to them. He knew they would figure it out on their own in time.

After many, many weeks, they found themselves in the portion of Earth the Biggens called the Central Lakes and Forests District Region and were soon back in Pinecone's territory. She introduced Jessophat, Caroline, and Sanial to the former Elder. The Biggen squirrels then embraced Pinecone as they cried into each other's shoulders over Twig's death. The Elder was not as surprised now as he would have been at first to learn their pup had seen as many winters as he had.

Conversations were muted during the dinner the Biggens shared with their three cousin squirrel guests. All three ate many, many butternuts. They learned that the Biggen authorities had searched throughout the local forest after the attack. They had found the owl's nest. Owl pellets were found and taken to a Biggen learning place called a 'university' to be tested. Sadly, the results helped close one missing Biggen pup report from the nearby Biggen village. Aldin struggled to come up with a way to explain the testing to the former Elder. The Elder waived it off responding he understood there were Biggen things that could not be explained in chitterspeak.

"Pinecone?" Jessophat asked pausing in hesitation a moment before continuing. "The officials had taken Twig's body to examine along with the owl. Once they finished, they put his body in stasis until your return. They'll want to know what to do with his body."

Pinecone shed a few tears as Aldin translated and explained to the former Elder.

Pinecone pulled her flatpanel off her back and tapped away. "Ask the officials if they know of a Biggen predator family who need food and would be willing to eat him."

There was a shocked look on the muzzles of all three Biggen squirrels. The Elder nodded in approval as Aldin translated, though the Elder had understood most of the Biggenspeak sentence on his own.

Pinecone continued. "It is our way. If die without predator doing the killing, we lay the body on the forest floor and let carrion eaters have it. Before I do the same for Twig, I would like to offer his body to Biggens who may need the food. Biggens help us. We help Biggens."

"I will inform them," Jessophat reassured her.

Pinecone tapped away some more. "I want to go look at my nest hollow. Aldin, would you come with me, please?"

Aldin glanced at their hosts and the former Elder.

"I stay here," the former Elder stated.

It didn't take long to reach the nesting hollow. After a quick inspection, Pinecone drooped her tail and began to weep. Aldin hugged her and slowly rocked her back and forth as she began to cry in earnest, shedding tears into his fur.

"I no smell Twig scent," she managed between sobs.

"It's been a full season since his death, Pinecone," Aldin stated in Common. "I'm not sure what customs are here. If you really want to remember his scent, you could ask those who have his body to give you a tuft of his fur as a keepsake."

She partially pulled back from him to look him straight on. She wigwagged her tail up and down once in the affirmative. "Good idea. I ask Kind to ask for me." She stared into his eyes. "I left Biggen viewer at Kind's nest. Is hard say this in Chitterspeak. I no want stop being Biggen Voice. I no..."

"You aren't looking forward to this last meeting, are you?"

She nodded. "After done, you leave. Twig choose Friend replace Twig. I promise no chase Friend if Friend say no. I no want you leave. I want you stay with me."

Aldin pulled her back into a hug. "Who says I want to leave? You have seen what my life is like now for a full season or as Biggens measure it two-and-half-months. You've stayed by my side through that, Pinecone, with no complaints. I've become as attracted to you as you have to me. You think I don't want to have you snuggled down next to me at night? As to Twig's

suggestion,” Aldin nipped a forepaw with the claw of his other paw. Before he could do likewise to her, she stopped him.

“No,” she said.

Aldin looked at her in shock. “You don’t want me as your mate? You just said you want me to stay.”

“It is not the way of your people, Friend.” She paused a moment and tickled his chin with her tail tip. “We be mates your people rule and mine. Wrong time to chase.” She gently nibbled the base of one of his ears. “We still try make pups with no chase first. If we no chase, no pups. Come, Friend, my mate.” She gently tugged him into the nesting hollow.

Aldin did not hesitate and allowed himself to be drawn into the nest.

They returned to their hosts nearly two clicks later.

Jessophat greeted them stating, “I was starting to worry about you two. Neither of you took your flatpanels with you.”

Carulin glanced at her flatpanel a moment. “We were worried as there is a major snowstorm coming. Will the three of you stay with us through the storm?”

Aldin and Pinecone turned to the former Elder. He looked at both of them. Everyone noticed they were very close side-by-side.

“I feel storm coming,” the Elder said. “How is nest?”

Pinecone drooped her tail. “I chase around world with Friend and you all harvest time. I look at nest. Nest no ready for winter storm. Nest no keep us warm in storm. We stay in nest, we freeze die.”

The Elder nodded. “We stay with Biggen squirrels if they no overfeed us.”

The others all gigglechattered at that.

“Thank you, Elder,” Pinecone replied, “for chose stay with Biggens. You, I, and mate all safer and warmer here. Kind is fitting name for Biggen who share his nest with us.”

She snuggled up to Aldin and wrapped her tail around him. He did likewise without hesitation nuzzling her affectionately.

The Elder leaned over to his host and whispered, “See, I speak true when Pinecone and Friend go out. Now they mates.” Jessophat simply nodded.