

TWENTY-FIVE

The storm raged for three days leaving over a mit of snow on the ground. It was a good decision to not try and wait it out in Pinecone's old nest hollow. It was likely they would have frozen to death if they had tried, never mind a lack of food. There was no worry on either staying with Jessophat/Kind. Like the former Elder, Parliament would ensure Pinecone had enough food until spring once she was done her assignment.

They had saved her forest for last as she was an outcast. She wasn't looking forward to this meeting as she had admitted to Aldin before the storm. However, it needed to be done, so that the work Parliament had sent them out to do would finally be finished. Hopefully, they didn't instantly chase her away with the Elder present. After this, they needed to report back to Parliament. That could be done through the large flatpanel at Jessophat's home.

It took little time in the hovercraft to venture back into the portion of the forest she hadn't set paw within for many seasons. The hovercraft settled softly into the top of the fresh snow sinking just a little bit. The door opened. She moved towards the opening determined to get this done with. The former Elder stopped her before she could leap out into the snow towards the nearest tree.

"Hush, listen," he chittered quietly.

All they heard was the breeze in the tree branches. There was no bird song or any other animal noise.

"It's too quiet," the former Elder stated wigwagging his tail nervously. He pointed outside with his tail. "There are no tracks. No squirrel has come this way today. With deep snow, maybe they burrow here like small rodents."

Pinecone shook her head in the negative. "I no burrow. I no think others burrow."

"Well, there's one way to find out if there are any squirrels about," Aldin stated. He stepped over by the entryway and chittered loudly up into the trees. "We come, seek squirrel Elder!"

There was silence for a moment and then a faint warning scree echoed back. "Biggens beware! Truce! Big predator bird. Flee!"

"SCREEEEEE!!!!!" Pinecone screamed as she yanked the Elder aside back away from the hovercraft opening.

Aldin saw the giant owl descending towards him rapidly, "SPIRIT!" He exclaimed before shouting, "CLOSE!", in Common. The hovercraft's door quickly closed. "There's another one?!"

Aldin didn't have time to vocalize the rest of his thoughts as the giant owl slammed hard into the clear dome of the hovercraft, causing the craft to shake violently and shift in the snow. It sat

stunned briefly on the ledge between the clear dome roof and the side of the hovercraft. It quickly came to its senses, hooting in frustration. It tried to scratch at the dome with one large taloned foot, leaving scratch marks in it. After a couple more tries, it spread its two mit wide wingspan, leapt into the air, flapping its wings, and headed back up into the trees and was quickly out-of-sight.

“Spirit, it’s huge!” He exclaimed in Common. “Larger than any owl back home!” He turned to the flatpanel built into the hovercraft. “Video communication: Connect to Jessophat!”

The hovercraft’s built-in flatpanel remained dark. He scampered over to it and tapped it. Nothing. He wigwagged his tail in frustration.

“Return to previous coordinates,” he ordered.

The hovercraft rose briefly and then settled back in the snow. A purple light lit-up brightly on the instrument cluster.

“Open door.” The door opened. “Close door.” It closed. “Return to previous coordinates.” Again, the hovercraft rose briefly and then settled back in the snow. The purple light on the instrument cluster remain lit.

Aldin sighchittered as he turned to the others. “We stuck,” he said in chitterflick. “Owl damage Biggen flyer. I no know how fix flyer.”

Pinecone reached for her flatpanel before remembering she and Aldin and left theirs at Jessophat’s as it was thought they wouldn’t need them. She moved over by Aldin and tapped at the built-in flatpanel. It partially lit for her but the image was scrambled in large square blocks. She tried placing a call to Jessophat. The flatpanel went dark and a second purple light lit-up on the instrument cluster.

Aldin pointed outside the dome with his tail where the antenna used to be.

“Owl break part needed for Biggen viewer to work.” He drooped his tail. After a moment, he looked at them. “We can no stay here. We must try flee to trees. Try reach squirrel who warn us. If see owl, I lure back to Biggen flyer. Trap owl in flyer.”

“No!” Pinecone declared stamping a rear paw for emphasis.

“You have better idea?” Aldin asked.

Pinecone shed a few tears as she pulled him close to her, wrapping her tail around him. “No. I no have better idea. Owl kill Twig. I no want owl hunt/kill Friend.”

“I no want owl hunt/kill Pinecone or Elder. We can no stay here.” He pointed to the deep scratches in the dome with his tail as he gently pulled out of the embrace. “Owl come back, owl break in. Owl hunt/kill/eat us. We can no stay. No room dodge owl. We must flee.”

The former Elder stepped in. “Friend speak truth, Pinecone. We can no stay here. We must flee.”

She looked about and then back at the other two and nodded.

“Ready?” Aldin asked the others. They flicked their tails up and down once indicating they were.

“Open door!” he ordered in Common, followed by, “Go!” in chitterspeak.

The hovercraft’s door slid open and all three leapt out in the snow sinking a bit with each leap, scurrying as fast as they could to clear the five mit distance towards the nearest tree. They started climbing upward as fast as they could.

A warning scree echoed through the forest, this time a bit closer.

Aldin paused on a tree branch and looked about. He urged the other two to keep going as he turned tail and headed back towards the hovercraft. He spotted the huge owl, silently gliding in. He could tell it had spotted him as it changed course towards him. He leapt from the tree and into the imprints he and the others had made from the hovercraft, hoping not to sink further as the snow had been packed down. He felt his skin crawl as he leapt from snow imprint to snow imprint back towards the hovercraft. He sank deeply into the third imprint. He took a brief sideways glance to see the huge bird quickly coming in for him. He frantically started digging as his heart raced.

Pinecone paused high up in a near by tree.

“We need to keep moving!” the former Elder chided Pinecone.

Pinecone ignored him. She stared down in horror as the owl dropped into the snow where Aldin had sunk, talons extended. “NO!!!!” she screeched.