

THREE

“Hello Enhray,” Aldin greeted the martin in English over the viewer, wigwagging his tail in greeting.

“Greetings, Am-bahs-ah-der ‘Tree Rat’,” the martin toothy smiled back at him in English.

Aldin switched back to Common. “That was pretty good, Enhrey and as you know, you’re the only individual I would tolerate that from. How’s family and work?”

“I just received a promotion. Phyllis is doing well, so are the kids. And you?”

“I’m doing well, Enhray. Pinecone is pregnant. She’s expecting four pups mid-winter.”

“Congratulations, Aldin.” Enhray shoulders then sagged.

“What’s wrong, Enhray?”

“I’m still coming to terms that cousin squirrels are sentient like us. It means I’m a murderer.”

Aldin sighchittered. “We’ve been over this before, Enhray. You were a child. Neither you nor your father knew cousin squirrels were sentient. Considering how quickly cousin squirrels grow and die, there’s probably no one who would remember the incident if you tried to seek them out in that forest to ask forgiveness. Look, if it will help, I’ll ask our local squirrel Elder, that’s the local cousin squirrel’s closest thing to a governing body, to listen to you. You can ask her for forgiveness.”

“Really?”

“Yes, but it will have to wait for another day.”

“Very well. Thank you, Aldin. Where do we start today on our lessons between Ing-lish and Common?”

“How about, I teach you an English cuss word and its context, then you do one in Common for me?”

Enhray raised an eyebrow. “Why cuss words, Aldin?”

Aldin scuffed a paw. “You do not truly master a new language until you can understand slang and cuss words in it. I hear them, but I do not understand them nor can I seem to remember them when spoken to, at, or near me. And if I’m asking you to teach me those, it’s only fair I offer to do likewise in return.”

Enhray nodded. “Alright, so what Ing-lish cuss word do you wish to start with?”

“Shit,” Aldin stated.

Enhray tried it a few times. “And what does it mean?”

“Scat. It is a minor cuss word/insult in English. For example, telling someone they’re as worthless as a piece of shit.”

Enhray laughed at that. “Yes, I can see how that can be insulting.” He tried it a few more times, finishing in English with, “You pee-is of shit!”

Both of them broke down in laughter over it, knowing he didn’t really mean it.

“So, what Common cuss word you want to learn more about?”

“Let’s start with one or more of those you uttered at me in your jail cell...”

Teacher wigwagged his tail in greeting when his great grandpup answered the call. She did likewise.

“Is good to see you, Great Grandsire.”

“Is always good to see you, Great Grandpup. Squirrels here very busy last three” he held up three claws in case she didn’t remember the word he taught her before, “days. Our Elder, Tassel, fear we become too dependent on Biggen squirrel Kind. She hold meeting of squirrels out in forest away from Kind, mate, and their pup to speak. We accept Kind’s help as no squirrel here has enough food to last to spring. But most have some saved food. Tassel suggest that squirrels gather most saved food and bring to Kind’s nest and add to midden storage here. Squirrels ask how we do that. It take long time during harvest to gather food while avoiding owl. Friend, Pinecone, and I show them how use Biggen backpack tool.”

“Backpack useful tool. Carry much food, less trips.”

“Yes, Great Grandpup. Squirrels agree do what Tassel suggest. She wise Elder, helps squirrels make right choose. No order them. Using backpacks still take three days to gather most food and bring here. We fill one of Kind’s empty midden hollows full. We find four more squirrels owl no kill eat. They scared, cold, alone, near out of food. Tassel and I speak to squirrels and explain how we live with Biggen Kind for rest of winter. They agree join us. Better risk trust Biggens than starve, freeze die. Is good. They now no starve, no freeze. While squirrels gather food bring to Kind’s nest, Tassel suggest squirrels leave some behind in middens in their territories. Prepare should late snowstorm come after squirrels go back to their territories in spring.”

“Tassel wise Elder.”

Tassel poked her muzzle in over Teacher's shoulder. "So is Teacher." She nuzzled him. "You tell Great Grandpup yet?"

Teacher nuzzled Tassel back. "No. I speak next. Great Grandpup, Tassel choose me."

His great grandpup smiled wigwagging her tail in delight. "As you speak last time, Great Grandsire. May you and Tassel have many pups and see many winters together."

"We need to go, Great Grandpup. Kind needs viewer for Biggen things."