

THIRTEEN

“Hello?” A tasseled ear citizen squirrel with tawny brown mixed in with salt pepper gray fur blinked at the screen a moment and then smiled. She glanced over her shoulder, “Orlan! Aldin’s on the viewer. Come!”

Her mate, who lacked tassels and looked more like Aldin than her joined her. “Hello Aldin!”

“Hello both of you, Aouphril and Orlan, my two oldest friends. Parliament will be taking a two-day break starting tomorrow. Would you mind if I drop by for a visit as I’m only a couple klicks¹ away?”

“Of course, you may drop by, Aldin,” Aouphil responded. “You’re welcome anytime, though we may not be here much. The new pizza business is keeping us very busy. We’ve had to hire others to help.”

“That’s wonderful! I’m glad it’s working out for you. I hear business is booming for your cousin too. If you’d rather I not stop by so you can rest in your free...”

Orlan cut him off. “Don’t you dare back out after offering to stop by. We’ll make time for you.”

“Very well, I’ll be by tomorrow. I’ll drop by the pizza shop first if you like.”

“That’s probably best,” Aourphril responded.

“Oh, and congratulations, Aourphril.”

She looked surprised at him. “On what?”

Aldin stared at her a moment cocking his head one way and then the other a moment. “Squirrels don’t carry body fat that way. I doubt citizen squirrels are any different in that aspect. You’re pregnant.”

“You can see that?” Orlan responded.

“No one else has noticed yet,” Aourphril replied holding both her hands to her abdomen. “We’ve kept it quiet for now. I’m due in the fall. Unlike cousin squirrels, our pups take longer to be born.”

Aldin wigwagged his tail left to right slowly a few times. “For some it can be a touchy, private subject...”

“We took your suggestion, Aldin,” Orlan stated.

¹ Klick-hour

“I was scared at first after growing out my claws. But we learned together how to climb. You remember Giguere? He taught us how to climb. I quickly gained confidence. When we were ready, Orlan chased me through the trees like we were cousin squirrels. It apparently worked.”

Aldin smiled and nodded. “Alright, I’ll see you two tomorrow say, lunch time at the shop. Talk to you later.”

Aldin was sitting on a cushion that elevated him enough to be more on his hosts’ level at the table. A pan of pizza topped with pinenuts, ‘mushrooms,’ and sausage-like vegetable-based protein wheels sat in the center of the table. His two hosts sat across from him. To him, Aourphril was clearly starting to show she was pregnant. Of course, maybe he had a better eye for it as his mate had been pregnant recently, never mind nearly all the other females in the colony. They all nibbled on slices of pizza enjoying each other’s company. Fortunately, it wasn’t too busy in the shop at mid-day and their helpers took care of the incoming orders. They explained the shop was usually very busy at supper time. They had also expanded into sandwiches locals were used to eating.

Aldin glanced around and then asked quietly. “How many are you expecting? I know citizens usually have just one at a time, but you’re showing too much too soon.”

“You have a sharp eye, Aldin. I’m expecting twins.”

“Your suggestion may have worked too well,” Orlan added with a gigglechitter.

“Congratulations again. May they be strong and healthy.” Aldin nibbled a little more and then sighed. “I hope Parliament wraps-up its face-to-face business quickly this session so I can get home to Pinecone and the pups.”

“Sometimes, I’m jealous of cousin squirrels,” Aourphril replied.

“Oh?”

“Forty-five days versus five months².”

Aldin nodded.

“Do you have names for them yet?”

“Back on Terra, we would name them when their eyes opened. Pinecone and I did likewise. However, the Colony is doing things a little different. As most of the cousin squirrels that make up the Colony chose their own names, they’ve decided that pup names are temporary. When they become adults, they may change them if they wish.”

² New Earth months are 35 days long, split into five weeks of seven days. A day is about an hour/klick longer than on our Earth (Terra). The New Earth year has 10 months.

Aldin pulled his flatpanel off his back and displayed a picture of his mate and their young pups. Both Aourphril and Orlan awed over them. Three had pepper-gray fur on their backs with white chest fur like their parents. Two of those three had a thin light brown stripe between their white chests and pepper-gray fur like their father. One of those two had light brown fur mixed in their muzzle just like their father. The fourth pup was all white. His brown eyes showed he wasn't a true albino.

"The names we've chosen for now are," he pointed to the white one first, "Cloud, in honor of my father, who also was a non-albino white squirrel." He pointed to the pepper-gray one with no brown fur, "Twig, in honor of Pinecone's first mate." He pointed to the one with brown stripes, but gray muzzle, "Blossom." And the remaining one that looked very much like him, "Chatter. He has been the most vocal of the bunch so far, so we thought that was a fitting name for him. Three boys and one girl. More specifically, boy, boy, girl, and boy." Aldin whirled his tail proudly.

"You've changed quite a bit from last summer, my friend," Aourphril stated.

"And I think for the better," Orlan added.

Aourphril nodded. "You seem more confident. Maybe having a loving mate," she snuggled up to Orlan, "is just what you needed. I just wish your 'Colony' was closer by."

Aldin nodded. "Perhaps." He then drooped his tail. "And, yes, I wish it was closer to here too." He fell silent a moment. "Also, part of me feels guilty in some ways."

"Oh?"

Aldin fiddled briefly with the napkin next to his plate while looking down. "Butternut," he uttered and paused again before continuing. "She tried so hard to win me over before Pinecone came into the picture."

"Have you spoken to her recently?"

"Not yet, I'm having dinner with her and Raoul this evening. I'm not sure how well that is going to go." Aldin shrugged.

Aourphril drooped her tail and they all were silent for a bit while nibbling on more pizza.

"Do you have a place to stay tonight? Our door is always open to you, you know, Aldin," Orlan offered.

"I may take you up on that. Thank you."