

FIFTEEN

Aldin, Raoul, and Butternut made small talk about the colony during the meal. Aldin learned that Nimble was keeping in touch with Butternut, which was good. They inquired on the health of Pinecone and their pups. He showed pictures of them and provided their names. He thanked Butternut for directing Nimble's mate, Lily, to assist them with their pups, especially since he couldn't always be there thanks to his work as Ambassador. Throughout the conversation, Aldin could easily read Butternut's body language. He drooped his tail realizing he was the cause of her distress.

"I'm sorry, Butternut," he uttered.

"For what?"

"I can see I'm making you uncomfortable. Teacher explained to me how you and Pinecone had an agreement in regard to me."

"Agreement?" Raoul asked as Butternut drooped her tail.

Aldin turned to Raoul. "Remember our conversation with Elder Teacher after Twig's death, Raoul? He was concerned about Butternut and Pinecone fighting over me. He spoke to the two of them. They came to an agreement. Part of it was that both would stop trying to win me over unless I showed interest first. And part of it was that if one won me over, they would work together to get me to show interest in the other. At that point they planned to work as a team to convince you we should become a quad pairing much like your adopted grandpups, Nimble, Shadow, Lily, and Buttercup."

Raoul glanced over at his mate, who nodded.

"It's true," Butternut responded while drooping her tail again. "The plan had been for them to return here after they finished their assignment. I knew they would be mates before the end of the assignment. You don't sleep together for several months and not get use to each other's scent. You don't know how hard it was my first year in the forest preserve to resist Teacher when he tried to win me over after sharing his territory and nest with me, teaching me how to survive as a cousin squirrel."

"Add to that Twig naming Aldin his successor. How could I compete against that? Of course, things didn't turn out as planned. Who could foresee she would be welcomed back among her people after being banished as she had been? Pinecone called me after she and Aldin became mates. She offered to keep her end of the bargain despite those changes." Butternut hugged Raoul and then looked him straight in the eyes. "I told her not to tell Aldin about our agreement. I would only try to win him over, if he shows interest first as I said to him after our agreement."

Aldin relaxed a bit. Raoul suddenly burst out laughing. They both stared at him. It took him a few ceklicks¹ to get the laughter under control. "Aldin," he finally managed, "I'm not really sure

¹ Ceklick-minute. There are 100 ceklicks in a klikk

why I'm laughing at all this. In some ways I'm not surprised that Pinecone and my mate made an agreement like that. And now, I think part of me would be up for it."

"What?"

"I admit, I have been hesitant to have you join us as a third member, Aldin. Maybe it's jealousy in that I'd fear Butternut would eventually leave me for you as you can give her children and I can't?" He shrugged. "Which is silly if you think about it. If she were going to leave me over that, she and Teacher would have become mates that first year and she'd have never returned to me.

"I have supported her past attempts to win you over as I love her. And to be honest, I didn't think she would succeed as you indicated time and again you weren't ready to raise a family nor did you want to come between us. However, that's obviously changed as you and Pinecone have four healthy pups. Also, it would bring Pinecone into it. You would be sharing her with me as I would be sharing Butternut with you. That would tamp down the unfounded fear I have that Butternut would leave me for you." He sighed. "The problem is the distance. You two settled in Pinecone's forest, not here. It wouldn't be right for us to raise the pups without their biological father present. And I can't relocate my college professorship to your colony."

Aldin wigwagged his tail nervously. "Are you serious, Raoul?"

He nodded. "As I had said to Elder Teacher while he was at the hospital, Butternut wants pups and I can't give them to her. Part of me expected Teacher to return here and try and court her again, as he had tried once before in the forest before he knew she was a 'small Biggen.' Obviously, that didn't happen, of course." He paused a moment then looked at him straight on. "If you're willing to let Butternut to 'try and win you over' again, I won't get in the way and I would accept you as my mate-brother. However, if she does win you over, Pinecone best be ready to spend time with me in return, even if it's nothing more than 'nesting' together."

Aldin looked back and forth between them like he was cornered by two hungry predators. This is not how he had expected things to turn out. He wanted to flee, but Raoul and Butternut were between him and the door. His tail nervously wigwagged back and forth giving away how he felt.

Butternut moved up next to him, unblocking a route to the door. "I can tell you're not ready for such a commitment at this moment, Aldin. But I hope maybe in time, you'll consider it. Perhaps you and Pinecone would allow us to visit for a while this summer after your kits are a little less of a pawful. I think the Terran phrase you said once was 'Test the waters,' so to speak, and see if we would work as a quad pairing."

"I'm not ready for this," was all Aldin could stammer as his tail continued to wigwag back and forth.

"I understand," Butternut responded, while inching a little closer to him.

“Do you have somewhere to stay this evening?” Raoul asked. “You are welcome to stay with us tonight if you don’t.”

Aldin’s tail continued to wigwag nervously. “Actually, I...” he trailed off as Butternut gently nuzzled his neck disrupting his thoughts. She brushed one paw gently and slowly down his back. One of his rear paws started to thump as his tail froze, except for the very tip, which vibrated rapidly. She nuzzled his neck a second time. What resistance he had to the idea melted away. A small part of his mind realized Pinecone must have taught her his weakness to that move. If she encouraged him to chase her that moment, he knew he would be unable to resist.

“If you stay,” Raoul continued, “I’ll ‘chaperone’ and make sure she behaves, mostly.”

Butternut gently tugged him towards the hammock she and Raoul shared. He didn’t resist too much. He was able to get a quick message off to Aourphril and Orlan about his ‘change of plans’ for the night. As Raoul promised, Butternut behaved other than to nuzzle him a bit more before he fell asleep with her wedged between him and Raoul.