

Butternut arrived back just in time to see the drey being finished. At least the exterior of it that is. Her adopted great grandpups were now using backpacks to bring leaves to Raoul to line the interior. She could smell cedar in the mix.

“Why you add cedar?” she asked them, raising her tail briefly in a curl.

All four paused and Night answered for his siblings. “Cedar scare away biting insects, Great Granddame Butternut.”

She flicked her tail up and down once. “Who teach you that?” she again raised her tail briefly in a curl.

“Sire Nimble and Dame Buttercup. Sire Nimble speak it one of first things you teach him.”

Again, Butternut flicked her tail up and down once as she experienced a feeling of pride. “I glad he remember,” she responded. “He is correct. It scare away biting insects, and I love the smell of cedar.” She bowed in thanks to her great grandpups as they went back to finishing the interior of the drey.

Half-a-pawspan later, she was invited in to inspect the drey. She was impressed. The top was impervious to light. She suspected it would also shed rain with ease. The sides weren’t so tight to allow in some light and air circulation. There was the right amount of leaves and moss on the interior to make it comfortable. And it easily fit both her and Raoul with enough room that Aldin and Pinecone should also be able to snuggle down with them. Her great grandkits proved this as all four of them could snuggle in next to her and Raoul. The four of them being half-gown making a good substitute. Both she and Raoul praised and thanked them. They departed quickly mentioning it was Teacher’s class time soon and they no wish to miss class.

Raoul was just happy to lay there curled-up in the drey snuggled next to her. She filled him in on her meeting with the others.

“Elder Foxy is right, you know, hon,” he replied when she finished.

She wigwagged her tail nervously. “What about your classes?”

Raoul attempted and butchered a gigglechitter. “I’ve been busy since spring, Butternut. I filed for a sabbatical in anticipation.” He pulled his flatpanel off his side and swiped at it. He paused a moment waiting for the letter to load. The drey was barely on the edge of what Jessophat’s and Carulin’s set-up could broadcast out to. He showed her. “The approval just came through, finally. I’m excused from teaching for the coming year as I’ve taken a research sabbatical.”

She looked at him with her head tilted at an angle encouraging him to continue.

“Well, when else would I have a better chance to observe cousin squirrels up close. I’d never had an opportunity like this in Teacher’s old forest, even if his great granddaughter granted permission and I offered those I spoke to a backpack full of butternuts in trade. Here, in time, I’ll

be accepted as a member by more than our adopted family, and the others will, hopefully, just let me observe and interact. This drey is an excellent example. Yes, I could have asked you to let me watch as you build one back home, but I got to help build this one and now my understanding of the process is more complete than if I had simply watched.” He shifted slightly. “And it’s more comfortable than I imagined. I’m going to have a lot to jot down about this later. My challenge will be showing enough discipline to write all this down every day rather than just live the moment, so to speak.”

“You’ve heard how long the winters are here. This drey is a good summer home. It won’t last long, nor keep us warm come the first snowstorm. How are we going to manage that? It wouldn’t be right to move in on Jessopha and Carulin for the winter.”

“I’m a step ahead of you on that, too, love.” He swiped at his device again, patiently waited a moment, and showed her. “I’ve already planned the arrangements to outfit a tree much like Jessopha’s and Carulin’s. It’ll be similar in layout to their tree combined with what we had back home such as countertops that adjust in height depending on whether it’s you or me using them. There will be the soaker tub you love so much. I think it’ll be the tree directly north of this one. Oh, and with an interior ladder so I can climb up and down from the ground out of the elements. The work starts tomorrow and should be complete before the first snow flies.”

Butternut chitterwhistled. “That’s a lot of credits, Raoul.”

He shrugged as he tucked the flat panel back onto his hip and then gently scratched her just where she enjoyed it most at the base of her neck. “And what good do credits do if you don’t put them to work for you? If things do work out, we’ll relocate here for good and sell our old home. If it doesn’t work out and we don’t stay, we’ll gift the tree back to them in thanks for letting us visit. You want pups and as I can’t give them to you, I’m going to do everything that I can to give you the best chance of getting them, hon.”

She nuzzled him affectionately as tears welled up in her eyes as the emotions that she felt overwhelmed her for the sacrifices he was making for her.

He rolled over on his back, gently scooping her up in the process, and laying her on his stomach so he could more easily face her muzzle-to-muzzle. He lightly kissed her cheek. “I’ve seen how you continue to struggle back home, hon. Despite all Aldin has taught you, I see the fear you try and hide every time you go out and about among us ‘Biggens.’ Maybe you’ll find it easier to fit in among cousin squirrels. And I’m fascinated with what they’ve done here in such a short period of time, creating a blend of cousin squirrel and citizen society.”

“Thanks to Aldin.”

“Yes and no. He didn’t force these changes on them, nor did he promote them. Yes, he did speak about how his people lived when asked last winter. The others liked the idea so much, that all of them, except him and Teacher voted to give it a try. He didn’t vote in favor of it as he didn’t want to influence them. From what I heard from Teacher, he remained neutral as he felt at the

time, he was still just a visitor there to educate their Elder in Elder things. That vote was prior to Tassel choosing him as her new mate.”

Butternut stared at Raoul.

“Aldin and I have had several conversations since you officially ‘chose’ him this past winter nuzzling him and stroking his back. You could have had pups right then and there, hon, if you had chosen to scamper out the door. He would have followed you.”

“And once instincts were no longer in control and he was himself again, would he have forgiven me?” She flicked her tail left to right a few times. “No, I hope I have shown I have more respect for him than that. It needs to be his decision as much as mine.”

He nuzzled her. “And I’m very proud of you for that, hon.”