

The following day, Raoul found Butternut outside of Jessophat's and Carulin's tree. She was staring at her flatpanel, occasionally swiping a paw across it. She glanced up as his shadow cast over her. He was starting to build up his muscles, both upper and leg thanks to all the up and down climbing he had to do here.

"I'm here as I have a better connection. It's different out here, as you know, compared to back in the Northeast Hills Region. We're beyond the broadcast range for power and the network. Thank goodness Jessophat and Carulin have a satellite connection and solar panels. I've been researching all morning. It looks like I can do it, hon."

"Become a teacher?"

She flicked her tail up and down once. "Yes, I can become a basic school curriculum teacher more easily than I thought. I don't need to take any additional classes. Just a little studying, mostly to freshen up my skills/knowledge, and take the teacher exam. My biology doctorate more than meets the education requirement. I meet the necessary experience through the college classes I taught prior to the accident."

"That's wonderful!" he exclaimed scooting around beside her on the huge butternut tree branch so he could see her screen. "Do you need help studying for the exam?"

She flicked her tail left to right and back once. "No, dear. What I need you to do is work closely with the contractors on our new tree home. My students are going to need a strong connection to the world network if I'm to become a basic curriculum teacher." She pulled the plans up on her flatpanel. "This first lower level originally meant for food storage will become the classroom. We'll need a few windows added to that level and a bathroom. We'll just add another level or two below it to make-up for it. We'll need a large flatpanel on the wall. We'll also need a larger leech field as the extra bathroom will see more use." There was excitement in her tone of voice. "And we'll need more solar panels, too."

Raoul was quiet for a brief moment as he looked over the additions and he then laughed briefly before replying. "And just a couple days ago you were concerned about the credits I was spending."

"We'll make a deal with the Elders. If they want me to teach, they have to find a way to cover the extra costs."

"You really want to give this a shot?"

Butternut flicked her tail up and down multiple times. "You were right, hon. I felt lost and scared back home during and after my time serving in Parliament. The instinctual fear was difficult to suppress despite what Aldin taught us both."

She gestured about with her tail. "Here, the only time I feel fear is if I sense there may be a predator about. You know I enjoyed teaching in college the most. That made me your opposite as I know you preferred the research over class time."

He nodded.

“And as for living as a ‘normal’ cousin squirrel, that wasn’t for me either. One of the reasons I chose to return from the forest when Aldin showed up was that I wasn’t finding fulfillment as a cousin squirrel in that forest. Don’t get me wrong. It was important work I was doing, raising orphans. But that’s all I was doing. You know I’m more than a home busybody. And I had missed the comforts of a Biggen home. Here? It’s like the best of both worlds, Raoul. Cousin squirrels living a combination of how squirrels live in the forest, but with some of things Biggens use.”

He teased her, “Like having a soaker tub?”

She nodded vigorously. “Yes. I spent six years without my tub. That was the worst part of living in that forest, Raoul. Tongue baths.” She made a puckery face, sticking her tongue out briefly. “It’s instinctual, but nowhere as nice as a good soak.” She looked up at him and then tapped her flatpanel with her tail. “So, I’m going to give this a try and who knows, maybe I’ve found my new calling.” She shrugged briefly. “And whether it’s by Aldin or Teacher, I will have pups come spring.” She grasped his much larger forepaws in hers and gently pulled him towards her for a quick nuzzle. “Or maybe this is my version of a mid-life crisis?” She smiled at him. “And I can’t thank you enough for humoring me in all this, hon.” She drooped her tail. “Not that I’d wish it on you, but if they ever figured out a way to duplicate my accident, you know I’d rather bear your pups.”

Raoul shed a few silent tears and hugged her close. “I know hon. I would risk it if it were possible. You know I’m a squirrel at heart.” He sighed. “However, I suspect with my luck, if they figured out the process, I’d only wind-up as a cousin raccoon. And that would bring some difficulties in our relationship.”

“How so?”

“Well, for one, I’d become nocturnal. We’d hardly see each other while either of us is awake. While there is little research on them, if I recall, they go into a rest period in winter something like hibernating, but not.” He shrugged. “So, with the long, intense winters they have here, I’d literally sleep my life away. Finally, there wouldn’t be as much of me to snuggle with you. I’d only be about twice your size instead of my huge Biggen triple your size.”

She giggled. “That would still be plenty of you to snuggle, hon.” She hugged him tightly.

“I love you so much, Butternut.”

“As I love you too, Raoul. Thank you for this.” She gently pulled away. “However, I need to get back to studying. The sooner I’m ready to take that exam the better. I want to know if I’ve passed it before I give the news to the Elders. If Pinecone comes looking for me, let her know what’s up.”

“I will. I was also looking for you to let you know that I heard from Aldin. He and Blossom won’t return now until tomorrow at the earliest.”

Butternut drooped her tail. “Here it is, we originally came out here to ‘date’ with Aldin, and he’s off with his daughter. But that’s alright, I guess, as I wouldn’t have been able to give him much attention while working on this.”