

FOUR

“It’s about time!” Cloud exclaimed as a hovercraft arrived in front of him. He’d been in a queue for one for over a klick. Apparently, there was a high demand for them that day in this remote part of the Lakes and Forest District. Behind him several squirrels waited with a large stack of sacks filled with butternuts. The hovercraft settled to the forest floor and the door opened. Inside there was squeaking.

Cloud held up his tail to signal that the others should wait. They set down the sacks they had just started to pick up to form a chain to fill the hovercraft and waited. He peered in to see several cages, most filled with small rodents. His tail twitched nervously back and forth. Something wasn’t right here. He cautiously stepped into it and over to the control panel. He called up the vehicle’s travel log as his tail continued to twitch. After reviewing it, he peaked back out at the others. “Wait here. I return soon,” he called out in chitterspeak. He punched in the command for the hovercraft to return to its last destination.

“Wait!” Several of the others called to no avail as the door closed as it rose and shot off deep into the territory of The Refuge. Two of the squirrels darted off to alert the first Elder they could find.

In twenty ceklicks¹ it covered a distance that would have taken Cloud most of the day to travel climbing tree-to-tree on the far side of the territory of The Refuge, out past the furthest orchard and where his father had killed the owl the previous winter. The hovercraft slowed down and settled to the ground.

A citizen male weasel, roughly the same size as Elder Jessophat, watched the hovercraft return and settle on the forest floor in front of him. He looked non-plussed as the door opened and a white cousin squirrel stood in the doorway looking back at him.

“Mr. Choran, right?” the cousin squirrel asked in Common. “Loose something?” the squirrel curled his tail up behind his back briefly. There was a hint of amusement in the tone of his voice.

The weasel nodded. “Yes, I was releasing small rodents as permitted by your Elders when the hovercraft suddenly came on by itself and flew off.” He tapped his flatpanel, “And before I could grab my flatpanel to stop it, it was beyond the range.” He sighed, “and I’m too far out for the flatpanel to pick-up the network without the booster in the hovercraft. I wasn’t looking forward to the long walk back. Thank you...” he paused.

“Cloud Busheytail,” Cloud bowed. “Come on, let’s get the rest of these small rodents to wherever you planned to release’em and then I need a favor in return.”

Choran tilted his head slightly. “You’re one of the ambassador’s kids, right?”

¹ Ceclick-minute

Cloud nodded. “And I got his voice gene enabling me to speak directly to you, Mr. Choran. I’ve been in a wait queue for over a click for this hovercraft. If I simply turn it back to you, I’ll go to the end of that queue again. So, you’re stuck with me for the moment. I’ll assist you with releasing the rest of your rodents. In return, I’ve got a load of butternuts waiting to be hauled to the village processing plant. I want your help with that, after which you can be on your way.”

Choran nodded and bordered the craft. He started to reach for a cage of small rodents, and then quickly twisted, leaping at Cloud, catching the young squirrel off guard. Choran stood-up with the white squirrel grasped by the scruff of the neck. Cloud cried out, chittering as his tail wigwagged back and forth. He tried to struggle, but the weasel’s grasp was firm. His flatpanel lay on the floor of the hovercraft as he had dropped it as the weasel pounced on him. He continued to chitter fearfully.

Choran carried Cloud back out of the hovercraft and turned him around to look at Cloud. “That was easier than I expected. Programing the hovercraft to act like it left me by accident worked quite well. I eat way too much small rodent. I was thinking it’s time to vary my diet a little with some young squirrel.” He smiled, showing his sharp teeth to the young squirrel.

Cloud chitter squealed louder than before as his tail whipped about faster. He lost control of his bowels. And as suddenly as he had panicked, a calm fell over him as he bowed his head and remembered the warning his parents and the other Elders had given him and all the others about never approaching Biggens who were not members of The Refuge alone. He shed a few tears and then looked up at his captor. “Please make it quick.” He then closed his eyes and waited for the end.

Choran raised an eyebrow at the squirrel’s last request and carried Cloud back into the hovercraft. He opened a cage and gently tossed the squirrel in, slamming it shut before Cloud could react. Cloud heard the door lock.

Choran’s voice was slightly muffled through the cage walls. “When the time comes, if you don’t struggle, I promise it will be quick. I prefer my meat cooked. I can’t do that out here. You’ll be coming back to my home. I’ve got several cages of small rodents to release first.”

Cloud pounded at the door. It wouldn’t budge from the inside. There was nothing to grasp. He was trapped. The cage was barely big enough for him to crawl pace one body length and back. The material was smooth with tiny holes for air circulation. It reeked of small rodent feces and urine. Seeing no way out, he curled up and whimpered, eventually falling asleep.

Cloud was jostled awake as the cage was moved about. There was a thud as it was set down a little harder than necessary. He cowered at the far back of the cage as the door opened. He stared for a moment in disbelief.

“Mom?!?” he stammered.

Pinecone had a stern look to her muzzle as she chided him in chitterspeak. “Elders warn you no approach any Biggen alone who is no member of The Refuge.” She chittergrowled briefly. “You lucky this Biggen weasel is good and no bad Biggen. Come out. If you must, flee up tree and scree your heart out. Once you calm down, come back here. We will speak this more after.” Her tail thrashed about showing her anger.

Cloud cautiously poked his head out to see both his parents standing there and other members of the Council of Elders in the lower branches of nearby trees. There were other squirrels further up watching him. Choran stood to one side.

“I’m sorry to scare you like this, Master Cloud. I had orders from your Elder Council to do so if a squirrel approached me alone.”

Cloud drooped his tail knowing he was in trouble and he was being made an example in front of others. However, the fear was too much. He quickly fled up the nearest tree screeing in terror. His cry was taken-up by others nearby. The tails of the Elders wigwagged, but they resisted the cry to flee. The weasel stared up towards where Cloud was for a moment and then glanced back at Pinecone and the other Elders.

“It’ll be a good 25 to 30 ceclicks before he calms down enough to come back down,” Pinecone typed into her flatpanel and it spoke for her.

“I really hated doing that, Elder Pinecone,” the weasel said as he picked-up the empty cage.

Pinecone’s flatpanel spoke as she typed, “I know. Thank you again for your assistance, Choran. You will be paid for your special service today.”

“No,” he replied. “I didn’t enjoy today’s task and hope to never need to do it again. Being able to release small rodents in your forest has been payment enough. Today was also the last batch of small rodents I’ll be releasing here until spring. The reason being that they need time to establish a territory and gather food for the winter. It would be cruel to bring any more here after today. It’s nearly too late in the season now. Any more released wouldn’t have the time needed to survive.”

Pinecone nodded and typed. “Because they would freeze-starve.”

“Correct.”

“Very well. You’ll be welcome to bring more in the spring if you wish. May you have a safe journey home.” She and the others bowed to him.