

SEVEN

The hovercraft came to a halt and drifted to the forest floor. The citizen tasseled ear, gray squirrel within saw there were several cousin squirrels, two citizen squirrels, and a citizen raccoon waiting for her. She stepped out with her one bag.

“Welcome, Mentor Hidget,” one of the cousin squirrels, female by her voice, spoke in perfect Common. “It is one thing to see each other on a flatpanel. It is very different in person, I’m sure. I’m Butternut.” She pointed to the others in turn introducing them, ending with the raccoon, her husband. Hidget remembered what she had read about her.

Some of the other cousin squirrels chittered greeting. Butternut quickly translated for them. One had nearly orange fur who kept bowing to her. “Thank you, thank you,” Butternut translated. Hidget waved it off.

“My chitterspeak is good,” she replied. “I understand Elder..Foxy, correct?” Hidget raised her tail in a curve over her back briefly.

The orangish-red furred squirrel wigwagged her tail up and down once.

“Where is class nest?” Hidget asked in chitterspeak.

“I will show you where the classroom is,” Butternut responded in Common.

“But first,” Carulin jumped in, “you need to learn to climb. My husband can take your bag.”

“Here, right off? Now?” Hidget asked nervously as Jochen accepted her bag. He quickly scaled the tree with it, vanishing in the canopy.

Carulin nodded. “The classroom is roughly 15 mits¹ above the ground. There is an interior stair, but climbing will be easier for you once you gain confidence in doing it. Jessophat taught me long ago. So, I know what it’s like to feel scared about it. The first thing I want you to do is raise your left foot.”

Hidget did so.

“Now rotate your ankle to your left as far around as you can.” Carulin raised her own left foot and rotated her foot around until it pointed behind her.

Hidget gasped in surprise. However, she did as she was told and gasped again as she could do the same. It felt a bit tight, but she was able to do it. Carulin gigglechittered like a cousin squirrel.

“You never tried to do that before, I take it?”

¹ Mit-meter, about 3 feet

“Maybe when I was a small pup and I got scolded for it. I’ve never needed to do it since and didn’t know if I could do it.”

Carulin nodded. “I want you to rotate it around a few times. Then do the same thing with your other foot. As you have never climbed before, you need to make sure the muscles that let you rotate your feet like that aren’t too tight from lack of use.”

Hidget rotated her other foot. She was amazed she could do it.

“Excellent. Now then, the only way to learn to climb is to climb.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry, we’re not going too high, just twice your height.”

“Okay,” she replied with hesitation.

Carulin led her up the tree roughly one-and-a-half mits above the ground. She paused and waited for Hidget to get up next to her.

“That’s a little hard on the claws,” she admitted.

“Your fingers and toes will toughen with time. Within a week or two, you won’t notice it.”

“Really? Alright, now what?”

Carulin turned around on the trunk and faced downward. She pointed to her rear feet with her tail. She had rotated them around. While she faced down, her feet were facing up. “Do like me.”

Hidget nervously wigwagged her tail. She worked her way around until she was facing downward like her. She could feel most of her weight was on her rear claws.

“Wow,” she uttered. “I did it.”

Carulin then let go of the trunk with her handpaws and dangled from her rear claws. She tapped Hidget gently with one of her fingers.

“What!? You’re crazy!”

Carulin shook her head in the negative. “No, you need to trust your claws. As long as they’re fully grown out, they will support you.”

Hidget closed her eyes took a deep breath and slowly let go of the trunk with her hands. They snapped open as she realized she hadn’t fallen.

“See. Now, we’ll get down. Grab the trunk again with your front paws.”

Hidget did so.

“Hold tight with your hands and do a little scrabble hop with your feet. Have your feet grasp the trunk again.” Carulin demonstrated. “Then you loosen your hand grip. Slide them down, and repeat. If that’s too hard, you can also move one footpaw and the opposite handpaw down at the same time.” She worked her way down the trunk using both methods and looked up at Hidget.

Hidget gulped hard. She gripped the trunk extra hard with her hands and scooted her feet down. She then scooted her hands down. Then her feet. Near the bottom, she lost her grip while scooting her feet down, tumbled, squealing in fear. She rolled and landed in a heap.

“That was a good first try. We’ll keep practicing like this later, going a little higher each time. And that’s all there is to climbing. Within a few days, you’ll get the hang of it. Then, once there’s a good layer of snow on the ground, we’ll work on jumps.”

Hidget wigwagged her tail nervously. “Jumps?”

“Well, there are some levels in the canopy where the branches of one tree intersect another, but most of the time, your option is jump or climb down from one tree, walk along the ground to the tree you need to get to and climb back up. Jumping is quicker and reduces the amount of climbing you need to do.”

“And we’ll wait until there’s snow on the ground because?”

“You’re going to miss on some of your tries at first. It’s better to land in snow than crash into hard ground.”

In her head, Hidget briefly questioned her choice to come here.

Through this, Butternut had patiently waited and now spoke up. “I’ll show you the classroom and your room now.”

Hidget snapped out of her thoughts. “Huh? Oh, sorry. Yes, please show me, Butternut.”

Butternut led her along the ground for some distance.

“This would be faster through the treetops, but I understand you’re not ready for that.”

Hidget looked around as Butternut led her on. She didn’t remember a time when she had seen trees as large as these. Many were a good 15 to 18 mits in diameter. Butternut paused at the base of one of these, a huge butternut tree that was at least 18 mits in diameter at the base. She pointed up with her tail. Hidget audibly gulped.

“I did warn you in the video conference as did Carulin just prior to your climbing lesson.”

“I...I know, but seeing it in the fur is so different from a camera angle. Will I need to climb?”

Butternut gigglechittered as she opened a door in the side of the tree that blended in perfectly with the rest of the trunk. “Your choice. You can test your climbing skills or take the stairs put in for my husband.”

“I think I’ll take the stairs.”

“Suit yourself. I’ll see you up top in a little bit.” Butternut nimbly scrambled up the trunk.

Hidget watched her for a moment and then entered through the doorway. She found the stairs and started climbing. They wound in a circle inside the trunk. She was amazed and wondered what engineering firm had built this. After the first 2 mits in height, there was a landing and a door on the interior side of the stairs. It had a sign that listed it as storage. She circled around the next set of stairs climbing ever upward. Every rotation was roughly another 2 mits in height change with a landing and another door on the interior, again marked as storage. This continued on for what seemed like forever, until she reached a landing with a door marked restroom. On her next rotation up, she found not a door, but an opening to the interior of the tree. As before another set of stairs continued up. She heard footsteps above her and looked up to see Butternut bounding down from above.

“Good, you climbed that quicker than I expected. Come.” Butternut led her through the opening and the room within lit-up. Hidget looked around. The classroom was oval shaped, close to 12 mits wide and 8 mits deep. There was a large flatpanel in the center of the wall opposite the entrance with the Common alphabet lined up under it. To either side were curved windows, currently with the shades drawn. There were signs above the windows marking them as emergency exits. The space was large enough for about thirty or so citizen children. She figured they could get a lot more cousin squirrel children in this same space. There were sitting pillows stacked in piles to one side. A water fountain at cousin squirrel height was mounted to the wall just to the right of the entrance. Looking back at the entrance there was an exit sign above it and on the wall in the stairwell, signs directing to go up or down to exit and the restroom on the floor below.

Butternut tapped an icon on her personal flatpanel and the shades rolled aside to show the forest canopy around them. Hidget went over to one of the windows and looked about. She gulped briefly when she looked down. It was as she had been warned. They were at least 15 mits up in the tree canopy.

“Wow,” she uttered. “Will the students need to come-up the stairs or enter from above?”

“No to either option,” Butternut replied, tapping another icon and the window panel in front of her slid down into the tree. “They’ll come straight in from outside.”

Hidget jumped back and looked up. The ‘emergency’ portion of the sign above that particular window vanished, sliding behind the ‘exit’ part.

“How is the connection to the world network?”

“Satellite link. Do you want me to pull-up a specific lesson or education channel?”

“No, that’s alright. Power? You seem too far out here to be connected to the village’s small power transmitter.”

“You’re correct. Solar with battery back-up.”

Hidget nodded. “I’m impressed. I’ve been in small towns and villages that would be envious for a set-up like this.”

“The Council of Elders wanted to make sure we had the proper equipment to teach.”

“What about personal flatpanels?”

Butternut drooped her tail. “That’s been a little more of a challenge as most of the meager resources of this new colony/village has gone into the creation of this classroom. We’ve received a donation of more than 100 used ones.”

“And not all of them are usable.”

“Correct.”

“Sadly, that’s not much different than elsewhere. We’ll find some way to make it work.”

“I’ll show you to your room unless you have more questions about this classroom.”

“No, that will be fine. Thank you, Butternut. I appreciate being offered a room. I figured I’d have to find something in the nearby village.”

She led her up the stairs. “I’ve been warned it snows a lot here, Hidget. You’ll be thankful for having a room here when that happens.”

“So, I’ve heard.”

“The village has a tunnel system. We don’t yet.”

“Tunnel system?”

“So, they can still interact with each other despite the snow.”

“It gets that bad?”

“Remember when I had the Ambassador show you how high up we were in Jessophat’s tree?”

She nodded.

“The classroom is about at the same level. The snow reached within 3 mits of that entrance last winter. Jessophat has said he’s had years where he has had to dig-out his entrance.”

Hidget hesitated on the stairs for a moment in shock as she tried to envision that much snow. She hurried to catch-up with Butternut.

“Here we are. Our home is your home.” Butternut showed her around the simple, but nicely furnished living space. Hidget was impressed by the height-adjusting counters in the kitchen. Butternut then led her up another level and showed her and Raoul’s bedroom. The bathroom with its soaker tub. Hidget was as impressed with the soaker tub as the counters in the kitchen, not expecting anything like that out here in the ‘wilderness’. Finally, she was led to the spare room that would serve as her bedroom. Her bag was sitting on the hammock.

“Make yourself at home. We’ll be having dinner at Jessophat’s and Carulin’s early this evening. Their tree is back where you first arrived. Raoul can show you a way through the canopy that will not involve any jumps, though I get nervous when he does that, or he can lead you down and along the ground. Do you need anything before then?” Butternut curled her tail up behind herself briefly.

“No, I’m fine. Thank you.”

Butternut nodded and darted out.