

TWENTY-EIGHT: EPILOGUE

The pause in the late winter storm didn't last long as the winds started to pick-up again. This was the second day for it in the forest. There was little the squirrel family could do but hunker down in their tree hollow and wait for better weather. Their internal weather sense told them it would be another day or two before it would let up. Just as the winds picked up again, the male slipped in and dragged a backpack after him into the hollow. He shook snow off his fur.

"See, biggen seed holder thing useful," he stated as he opened the pack up and passed nuts from within to the hungry pups and the female.

The pups nibbled greedily on the food offered. After eating through nearly half the contents of the pack, they pleaded for a story.

Their dame nibbled on a nut offered to her by the male who was not the sire of her pups, but they were too young to know that yet. She was growing to like him. He was as dependable as her late mate had been. He risked his life going out in the storm to get food for the pups, though they weren't his. Though he used the biggen thing, she could see that it was useful in this instance. She immediately knew which story she would tell her pups on that stormy day. Maybe the male had never heard it himself.

"I speak story dame speak once. Her dame speak her. Her dame dame speak her dame and back." She paused. "I no know how far. Long, long time ago. Different biggens then. No like biggens now. Strange biggens have little fur, stand and walk on back legs. Big as bears. Biggens predators. Biggens prey on all other animals," she paused, "and on each other." Her pups shuddered. "Biggens take squirrels and make smart like our biggens. Smart squirrels escape from biggens, fear biggens eat them. Smart squirrels live deep in forest far from strange biggens.

"Biggens no wise. Biggens think they wise. Think they control all. Biggens make big fire. Fire top predator. Biggens no control fire. Fire grow and grow, burn and burn." She shuddered. "Fire burn and eat around whole world. All Biggens die. Most animals, prey, predators, birds all die. Fire kill, eat all. Burn and eat all trees and plants." The pups shuddered. They didn't really know what fire was, but if it could kill and eat predators and trees, it was very strong whatever it was. Just then the tree swayed in a very strong gust of wind, adding to their fears. It was a very big tree and took a lot of wind to make it move at all.

"Smart squirrels know many things when fire come." Their dame drooped her tail. "They no know how stop fire. Many flee from fire, go far, far away and no return. No all escape. Those no escape hide in burrows like woodchucks. Burrows full of food, nuts and seeds. Some other animals also hide in burrows. After fire eat all on surface, have no more to eat, it starve and die.

"Then animals who hide in burrows come out. Smart squirrels replant forest. Smart squirrel elders fear more fire. Elders fear squirrels make mistake like old biggens and fire then come

back. Elders command smart squirrels forget biggen ways. Is only way stop fire come back. Most obey. That is why we no like biggens now.”

“What of smart squirrels no obey elders?” the male the pups thought was their sire asked.

“Yes, some smart squirrels no obey elders. They driven away from forest. In time they grow big and turn into our biggens. They grow lonely and make other biggens.” She looked directly at her pups. “You no trust biggens. Danger. You trust biggens long you forget how live like squirrel. Then you depend on biggens to live or you die.” She wigwagged her tail in warning.

“Is true,” the male added. “When I still pup, predator kill and eat my dame and sire.” The pups shuddered as the male drooped his tail. “Biggen raise me. I start depend on biggens. I start forget how live like squirrel. Is easy forget. Biggens give me all food I can eat. I no need search for food. Predators fear biggens. I no need watch for predators. Biggen raise me see I start forget. Biggen warn me. I must leave or be like pup forever. I choose to leave. She wise biggen. She no stop me. Other biggen give me seed holder thing. Gift remember them. I no forget.” He pointed to the backpack with his tail in the dim light coming from the opening to their tree hollow. “Then I find your dame.” He affectionately nuzzled her and she nuzzled him back without hesitation.

Yes, she decided, she would keep him.