

FOURTEEN

Both Pinecone and Butternut had calmed down by the time Parliament resumed. Pinecone took her place in the visitor's circle and pulled the flatpanel off her back and typed. "Have I satisfied your doubts as to whether I'm smart like you and not a dumb animal? Do you wish for me to start over in Biggen? Or do you wish for me to only speak of certain things in more detail in Biggen?" She paused looking about.

Larel raised her hand and was recognized. She stood up. "Ms. Pinecone, I have no doubts about you being sentient like us. I do have a question. Why did the other squirrels chase you away after you established your territory near Jessophat and his family?"

"I couldn't explain that as well in chitterspeak," Pinecone typed. "In Biggen, I was banished." Pinecone drooped her tail. "Though, I had no idea I would be punished in that way. It was only after that when I approached Jessophat and his mate and their son and became friends with them. I had little choice. I could freeze to death or I could take a chance trusting Biggens."

"Why were you banished for something you didn't understand at the time?"

"That will take some time to explain. It would be better if I first tell you a story. And it would be best if I tell it in chitterspeak. If Swifttail and Roundear are willing to come back down to translate. This story has been told for countless generations among squirrels. Dames telling their pups the tale."

She tucked the flatpanel away as Swifttail and Roundear joined her on the floor. She spoke in chitterspeak, again slowly, to allow Swifttail and Roundear time to translate for her. She nodded to them from time to time.

"I speak story dame speak when I pup. Her dame speak her when she pup. Her dame dame speak her dame and back." She paused. "Long, long time ago. I no know how long ago. Different Biggens then. No like you Biggens now. Strange Biggens have no 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 tail whipped back and forth nervously. "Biggens smart, know many things. Biggens trap squirrels and make squirrels smart. Smart squirrels escape from Biggens, fear Biggens eat them. Smart squirrels flee deep in forest far from strange Biggens. Smart squirrels hide from Biggens.

"Biggens think they wise. Biggens no wise. Think they top predator. Think they control all. Biggens make big fire. Fire real top predator. Biggens no control fire. Fire grow and grow, burn and burn. Fire burn and eat around whole world. Fire eat all Biggens. Most animals, prey, predators, birds all die. Fire kill, eat all. Burn and eat all trees and plants.

"Smart squirrels know Biggen will make mistake. Smart squirrels prepared for Biggen mistake. They fill burrows full of food, nuts and seeds. Fire come, they no know how stop fire. Many panic, flee from fire. Fire catch, burn, and eat them. No all flee. Those no flee hide in burrows

like woodchucks. Other animals also hide in burrows. Other animals no hunt squirrels in burrows. After fire eat all on surface, have no more to eat, fire starve and die.

“Then animals who hide in burrows come out. Animals who hide in burrows with smart squirrels no hunt squirrels many, many seasons. Smart squirrels replant forest. Smart squirrel elders fear squirrels make mistake like old Biggens and fire come back. Elders command smart squirrels forget Biggen ways. Must forget so fire never come back. Most obey. That is why squirrels no like Biggens now. Some smart squirrels no obey elders. They chased away from forest. In time they grow big and turn into, you, our Biggens. They grow lonely, trap animals make smart like them. They also grow big and turn into Biggens. I warn you like you my pups. Biggens no obey elders we must no trust Biggens. You trust Biggens you forget how live like squirrel. Then you depend on Biggens to live or you die. You become like pup forever.” Pinecone chattered a warning. “Story ends.”

She turned again to Swifttail and Roundear and thanked them before pulling the flatpanel off her back and began typing again. “Believe or not as you wish about my people’s origin tale. If there is any truth to it, your ancestors and mine are the same except yours were banished for disobeying the elders, while mine obeyed and have tried to forget how to be smart and instead live like other ‘dumb’ animals in the forest.” She drooped her tail as she continued to type, “And now I have been banished as I said before telling you that tale. Banished because I chose to settle in territory claimed by Biggen squirrel Jessophat/Kind and his family. And once banished, I had no choice but to trust Jessophat/Kind and his family. It was risk becoming a pup forever or freeze to death. Fortunately, they did not treat me like a pup. By the time spring arrived, we had become so close to one another that if I was a Biggen or they were normal squirrels, we’d have become mates.”

There was a little grumbling among some assembled by that last statement, which Pinecone ignored as she continued. “But Jessophat, Carulin, and I understood that could not be as it is forbidden among your people. They remain as close to me as if we were siblings. But my fate was sealed. Just as in the warning we give to our pups, as I’ve now trusted Biggens, I have come to rely on you more and more.” She held up her flatpanel briefly. “Without this I could not speak Biggen to you as I don’t have the vocal cords you have that allow you to speak Biggen.

“If it weren’t for the help of Representative Butternut’s mate, Dr. Raoul Kaynobble, who’s chosen chitterspeak name is Curious, I wouldn’t have a mate. He contacted a wildlife rehabber who was raising an orphan squirrel, he called Twig. Poor Twig was so traumatized when he arrived. I was more like his dame..mother to him for the first few months. Eventually, he chose to stay with me and we’ve raised two litters of healthy, strong pups. Strangely, as they’ve left to establish their own territories, they haven’t been chased off like I was. I’m thankful for that.”

Tears welled in her eyes. She looked about the chamber, trying to wipe them in between typing away on her flatpanel. “And as in the warning to our pups in our limited chitterspeak, I have begun to forget how to live like a squirrel. Here I am standing before a chamber filled with Biggens, many of you predator species, and I am not as scared as I would have been just a few days ago, partially thanks to Ambassador Aldin/Friend’s teachings. I consider Representative

Larel a friend, though she is a Biggen bobcat who could easily eat me in a single bite or two.” She shuddered and then glanced towards Larel. “I mean no offense, friend Larel.

“Twig, if you are watching this at Kind’s nest, I’m so sorry.” The tears began to pour forth from her eyes as she repeated that line in Chitterspeak before continuing. “I didn’t fully understand why you didn’t want me to come here before the Biggen Elders. Chitterspeak is so limited. You were simply trying to protect me from myself.” She again repeated those two lines in broken Chitterspeak between sobs as she set her flatpanel onto the floor, before curling up into a ball next to it, and started bawling.

“We shall take another fifty ceklick break,” the Chancellor announced.

Butternut quickly made her way to the floor and gently nudged Pinecone and spoke in chitterspeak, “I live with squirrels six years, Pinecone. I raise many pups who lost dame and sire. I like dame to them. I can be like dame to you. Come, cry on shoulder. You safe. I protect.”

Pinecone looked up at her with tear-filled eyes, sat-up and accepted Butternut’s embrace and bawled into her shoulder. Butternut rocked them back and forth slowly, chittering quietly into Pinecone’s ear in reassuring tones. Butternut wrapped her tail around Pinecone protectively as a dame would do to their pup when comforting them. Though the Chancellor declared a break, no other representative moved from their seat watching the two cousin squirrels on the chamber floor.