

SIXTEEN

The hovercraft slowed to a stop and settled onto the forest floor. A large tassled-ear reddish-brown furred citizen squirrel stepped out and looked about. Giguere looked at his flatpanel briefly to make sure he was at the correct coordinates. He wigwagged his tail nervously a moment, stepped towards the nearest tree, looked-up and called-out. (chitchitchitter) "I seek grandpup of small big one Butternut." (chitchitchitter) He paused a moment. Hearing nothing, he repeated the request.

Up in the canopy Butternut's adopted grandson looked down at the Biggen and turned to his mate. "I know Biggen. Friend of my granddame no granddame. He no danger."

"Make Biggen go away."

Butternut's grandson (sighchittered) and replied, "I try." He climbed down and paused on a branch about twice Giguere's height above him.

"I come. I know you. Mate want you leave. Why Biggen squirrel come here?"

Giguere sighed a little bit in relief. (greetingsflick) "Butternut send me. She hope you and mate doing well. I bring news. Butternut now Biggen Elder."

The wild cousin's squirrel's eyes widened briefly in surprise.

"Is true. Butternut go to Biggen Elder meeting place. Biggen Elders argue. Biggen Elders want speak to squirrel Elder. Want squirrel Elder decide who right who wrong."

"I no know where Elder claim territory I check with mate." Before he could turn around to go talk to his mate, she was beside him on the same branch.

"Biggen squirrel go away!"

Giguere bowed to the small wild cousin female. "I shall as soon as I know where to find..."

"Elder may no speak to you. Elder may no speak Biggen Elders. When sun at high point, follow shadow. Go that way rest of day. You find Elder territory. Go." (warningchatter)

Giguere bowed again. "Thank you. Biggen Elder Butternut offer gift to grandpups. Seeds and nuts."

"I no Biggen grandpup!" She chattered back angrily. "Go!"

"You mate to one she raise like grandpup. She sees you like her grandpup. I leave gift here. I go." Giguere set a small sack down at the base of tree, got back in the hovercraft and headed north.

Once he was out of sight, Butternut's grandpup turned to his mate. "That Biggen try help last mate. He good friend granddame no grandame Elder Butternut. Small Biggen Elder Butternut raise me after dame and sire die. If she no raise me, I die no be here. No all Biggens bad. I go get food."

Again, Giguere's hovercraft slowed to a stop at the distance his computer calculated a wild cousin squirrel could travel in half-a day. Like before, he wigwagged his tail nervously a moment as the hovercraft's door opened and he approached the nearest tree and called up. (chitchitchitter) "I seek squirrel Elder." (chitchitchitter) He paused a moment. Hearing nothing, he repeated the request. Hearing nothing a second time, he moved over a few trees and tried again.

Several more trees over, a squirrel watched the Biggen. She dared not give a warning call. He was too close. As quietly as she could, she made her way over several trees from the Biggen. She circled over to the far side and poked her head into a hollow in the tree. She nearly gagged from the stench.

"Elder?" She chitterwhispered.

The old squirrel within coughed briefly. "I still here. I no here long. Who crying out ask for Elder?"

"Biggen squirrel."

"Lead Biggen squirrel here."

The younger female wigwagged her tail fearfully. "No trust Biggens!"

The Elder tried to laugh, but it turned into a coughing fit. "Biggen can no harm Elder. Elder die soon. If Biggen squirrel seek Elder, let Biggen squirrel come."

"I bring Biggen squirrel here, Elder."

She quickly made her way to the tree where the Biggen stood at the base and dropped down to a branch a little more than twice the Biggen's height above the Biggen. "Why Biggen come here?" She called down.

Giguere looked up at the small squirrel. "I seek squirrel Elder. Biggen Elders send me. Biggen Elders argue. Biggen Elders want speak squirrel Elder. Want squirrel Elder decide who right who wrong."

She wigwagged her tail left to right. "Elder sick. Elder die soon. Elder say bring Biggen squirrel. Biggen squirrel climb?"

"Yes, I climb. I no climb good fast like you. I slow."

"Come." She darted up the tree and over to the one with the Elder's hollow. The Biggen squirrel walked over to the correct tree and was a slow climber as he said, but he climbed well. She watched him wrinkle his nose from the smell coming from the hollow. "Elder very sick," she warned him again. She stuck her head in the hollow's opening a moment. "Elder, I lead Biggen squirrel here."

The Elder coughed again. "Good. Biggen squirrel wish speak Elder? Speak."

Giguere couldn't stick his head inside the hollow. So, he put his face as close as he could despite the putrid scent. "Elder, my Elders send me find squirrel Elder. Biggen Elders want speak squirrel Elder. Biggen Elders argue. Want squirrel Elder decide who right who wrong."

"What Biggens argue?"

"Are squirrels smart like Biggens?"

The Elder tried to laugh but coughed some more. "Squirrels smart like Biggens. I no go to Biggen Elders. I die soon. The one lead you here new Elder after I die."

"Elder, what make you sick?"

The female who led him to the hollow answered. "Elder break tooth. Cause sickness. You smell sickness. Elder can no eat. Elder starve. Grow weak. Can no fight sickness. Elder die soon." She drooped her tail.

Giguere nodded. "Elder, come with me. I take you to Biggen healer. Healer might help."

The female chattered angrily. "No trust Biggens!"

This time the old Elder chattered a warning and the younger female quieted. "I still live. I still Elder," he chided her. "I choose go with Biggen squirrel. I stay, I die. I go, I might die. Might live."

"I go with you, Elder."

"No. Forest need Elder. You no go with me. You stay. You Elder now."

"Yes, Elder. I obey." She looked at Giguere. "Take old Elder and go. He too weak climb down. You carry. Take care old Elder he sire of sire of sire." She turned and fled through the trees, shedding tears as she went.

“Elder, I must touch you.”

“I no bite. I no resist. I too weak. Biggen squirrel do what must do. I die soon”

Giguere reached in and gently grabbed the elderly wild cousin squirrel by the scruff of the neck and pulled him part-way out of the hollow. Then using both hands, he lifted the smaller squirrel completely out and set him on a branch just above and to the right of the hollow. He climbed up onto the branch next to the smaller squirrel and removed the backpack from his back. He opened the top.

“Elder, I can carry you safely in Biggen sack.”

“I no bit. I no resist. I too weak. I die soon. Biggen do what must do.” The squirrel repeated again, wigwagging his tail weakly.

Giguere gently picked-up the wild cousin squirrel, set him inside the pack, and secured the flap. He put the pack back on and then began to slowly scale down the tree tail first. While he could go down face-first like a wild cousin, he didn’t want to knock his passenger about. He also didn’t trust the flap of his old college backpack, fearing it would become unsecured. He didn’t want to drop the sick, old squirrel. Once on the forest floor he made his way to the hovercraft. Once inside, he sent a command through his flatpanel for it to fly back to civilization and straight to the medical university. He gently wiggled the pack off, opened the flap and lifted the elder out, setting him on a cushion.

“Elder, we fly for...” (drooptail) “I no know term in chitterspeak. Time take sun travel one paw span. Biggen flyer fly fast. Go to Biggen healer. I have food and water.”

“I drink. I no can eat food. I starve die soon.”

Giguere poured water in a dish for the squirrel, who slowly lapped at it.

“Elder, I have food you no need chew.” Giguere pulled out a tube of butternut paste. “You can lick it.” He squeezed some onto the edge of the dish.

The squirrel sniffed it. “Smell like butternuts.” He weakly licked it and smiled. “It is butternuts.”

“It is ground down butternuts, Elder. I like it on other Biggen food. Make food taste better.” Giguere continued to squeeze little bits out onto the plate as the Elder licked it.

“Dame warn long ago. No trust Biggens or be pup forever.” The wild cousin squirrel looked directly at Giguere. “You feed me like dame feed weened pup. I no care if I be pup forever if I live.” The squirrel drifted to sleep.