

## NINETEEN

Two days later, Raoul was back in the Elder's hospital room with a cage. The Elder wigwagged his tail nervously.

“You ride in Biggen trap. Is trap no trap.”

The Elder looked to him with puzzlement across his muzzle.

“I show.”

Raoul showed the Elder how to open the door latch from both outside and inside the cage. He let the Elder try and he was also able to operate the latch.

“You ride in Biggen trap to Elder meeting place. Keep you safe from predators. You no trap inside. You can open, get out on own.”

The Elder wigwagged his tail up and down once indicating he understood and got into the cage, latching the door himself. Raoul carried the cage out of the hospital into a hovercraft. He set the cage down.

“Elder may get out of trap inside Biggen flyer if choose. Is two paw spans to Elder meeting place.”

“I sleep,” the Elder declared, curled up in the cage and was quickly asleep.

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Raoul carried the cage into the Parliament chamber and set it down in the visitor's circle. The Elder wigwagged his tail nervously.

“I return when Elders done speak.” Raoul left the chamber.

“So many Biggen predators,” the squirrel Elder squeaked softly to himself as his tail continued to wigwag nervously.

“Elder, how I help?”

The Elder focused on the squirrel just outside his cage. She looked like a normal squirrel except her fur was just pepper gray and her ears were rounded instead of tasseled like his. He moved up next to the cage bars near her and sniffed. His eyes widened.

“You squirrel like me. You look different.”

“Yes, I squirrel, Elder. Biggens have names for everything. My Biggen name is Pinecone. You safe here, Elder.”

The Elder wigwagged his tail nervously. “So many Biggen predators. Why you no afraid?”

“Biggens elders have rule. No hunt here. If try hunt here get locked in trap for full season. Can no leave trap. Given food water only. Watch. I show they no hunt.”

Pinecone scamped up to a Biggen bobcat. The Elder tried to cry out a warning but he was too scared to make any noise. Pinecone pulled a Biggen device off her back, tapped at it with her paws. Biggenspeak came from the device. The bobcat nodded and bent down. It and Pinecone hugged and nuzzled each other. Pinecone tapped at the device again and more Biggenspeak came from it. The bobcat replied. Pinecone returned to the Elder’s cage.

“See, Biggen predators no hunt here.”

The Elder stared at Pinecone. “You brave or you crazy.”

Pinecone gigglechattered a little as she replied, “Maybe I both, Elder.”

A Biggen lemur hammered a wooden thing against a second wooden thing it stood behind. The Biggen Elders all turned to the lemur and quieted down.

“Top Elder of Biggen Elders,” Pinecone said quietly to the squirrel Elder.

“We have a special visitor among us today,” the lemur started and hesitated and looked to Pinecone. “Does he have a name?”

Pinecone loosely translated and added, “Biggens have names all things. Do you wish choose name or do Biggens use Elder for you, Elder?”

“Biggen Elders call me Elder,” the squirrel Elder replied. “Or call me Pup.”

Pinecone translated his response tapping away at the flatpanel. Aldin stepped forward.

“May I assist? You can translate into chitterspeak for the Elder. I can translate into Biggen and save time.”

Pinecone sighed in relief and chattered. “Thank you, Friend.”

The Elder stared at the second squirrel. Aldin moved up to the cage bars. “Elder leave trap if choose. Smell.”

The Elder sniffed Aldin through the bars. “Smell like squirrel and different.”

“My people live far away, Elder. Long story. I can Biggenspeak without Biggen device help. My people like squirrel and Biggen both. My Biggen name,” he switched to English and then back, “Aldin. Mean Friend.”

The chancellor patiently waited for the squirrels to sort things out. He then asked, “Why would we call the squirrel Elder, Pup?”

Pinecone translated it to chitterspeak. The Elder chattered. Aldin repeated it in Common, “Dame warn me when pup no trust Biggens or become pup forever. I starve die when Biggen squirrel come. I choose trust Biggens. Biggen healer save me. I live. Good trade, pup forever and live.”

The Elder continued to chatter and Aldin translated. “Biggen Elders ask I come. I come. Biggen squirrel say Biggen Elders argue want Squirrel Elder decide who right, who wrong. Biggen Elders argue are squirrels smart like Biggens?” The Elder drooped his tail. “Yes, we smart. We try hard to be no smart, but we smart.” The Elder unlatched the cage, stepped out and climbed on top of it. His tail wigwagged nervously. “Is true Biggens no hunt here?”

The lemur nodded repeating the punishment that Pinecone said to him before, which she translated again. The Elder turned to Aldin and asked him to repeat the translation to him. Only when he heard it a second time, he relaxed a little.

“I sniff Biggen bobcat.”

Aldin translated this as a request to Representative Larel. She stepped forward and crouched down for the squirrel Elder. He dropped down off the cage and wigwagged his tail nervously as he approached her, leaving wet pawmarks on the floor. She did not make any sudden moves while he sniffed her over. The Elder’s eyes widened as he leapt back on top of the cage. Larel slowly got up and returned to her place.

“Is true! I smell no blood on Biggen bobcat Elder!” The Elder glanced at Pinecone. “Squirrel with Biggen name, Pinecone. Are you Elder?”

“I no Elder. I trust Biggens soon after leave dame nest. No choice other squirrels chase me away. I choose trust Biggens or I freeze die. Biggen squirrels share territory with me. They more like big squirrels. They learn chitterspeak. I learn hear Biggenspeak. I learn use Biggen tool to speak Biggen for me. Biggenspeak have more words.”

The Elder nodded and turned to Aldin. “And you, squirrel with Biggen name Friend. Are you Elder?”

“I lost and no know where my people are, Elder. Biggens no know where my people are. Biggen Elders name me,” Aldin paused a moment trying to think of a good way to describe what an ambassador was. “Is hard explain in chitterspeak. Close as I come is Voice for my people.”

The squirrel Elder nodded. “Then you like Elder.” He turned back to Pinecone. “I speak things only can speak to other Elders. Squirrel with Biggen name, Pinecone, you will be Elder.”

Pinecone nervously wigwagged her tail. "I see four," she held up four claws, "winters. I young. I no Elder."

"You will learn. In time, you will be Elder."

Pinecone bowed her head. "As you speak, Elder."

"Pinecone, do Biggen Elders know story of how they become Biggens?"

Pinecone wigwagged her tail up and down once. "Yes, Elder, I speak story to them before you come." She drooped her tail. "Some believe, some no believe. No believe Biggen Elders want trap squirrels, bring here, and ask they speak same story. Friend and I stop them. I ask them ask for squirrel Elder come speak."

Aldin translated all this back into Common for Parliament.

The squirrel Elder nodded and bowed to her. "I live because you speak to Biggen Elders to find me." He turned to the Lemur. "Elder of Elders, I no speak how you Biggens become Biggens. Pinecone already speak story. I speak on things Elders can no speak to squirrels. Can only speak to Elders." He glanced at Pinecone. "Is why I ask Friend and Pinecone if they Elders. Is why Pinecone will be Elder. First squirrel Elder order squirrels forget Biggen ways. In story first Elder fear if no forget then fire return. What story no tell squirrels is fire kill/eat all dumb squirrels. Only smart squirrels live. First Elder know if squirrels no forget Biggen ways, they become Biggens and new forest die. Squirrels and Biggens breath good air, make bad air. Forests make bad air good again. Forest die, squirrels and Biggens die. Smart squirrels must become like dumb squirrels or new forest die. Squirrels try hard obey first Elder. Squirrels choose mates who no speak Biggen good. In time choose mates can no speak any Biggen. When squirrels can no speak Biggen, squirrels forget many Biggen things squirrels know when fire come." Elder droop tail. "We try hard pup to pup to pup countless times. Try become dumb squirrels. Squirrels fail. We still smart like Biggens."

As the Elder explained this, many in Parliament looked to each other and back to the small squirrel. All remained quiet.

"Now in my forest small rodents die. No small rodents, small rodent predators hunt, eat squirrels. Squirrels no make pups fast like small rodents. Now less squirrels. Soon no squirrels. Forest needs squirrels. No squirrels, forest die." The Elder looked about the chamber nervously wigwagging his tail. "Biggen healer save me. Can Biggens save all squirrels?" His eyes locked on Butternut and he stared in disbelief, blurting, "You?! Here?!"

Butternut raised her forepaw, was recognized, and scampered down to the chamber floor. She let the squirrel Elder sniff her.

"It is you, small Biggen who live in forest," he held up six claws, "winters nursing no dame pups."

“You no Elder that first year. You like sire to me first year. You try get me choose you.”

“And you reveal you small Biggen. I run away.”

“And you reported me to your Elder. She speak to me. We speak long time. She choose let me stay if I help squirrels.”

“After, I hear what you do for no dame pups. You make good dame to no dame pups.”

Butternut turned to her fellow representatives. “After the accident that caused me to shrink and turn into a cousin squirrel my cousin instincts were too strong. I fled in fear to the forest preserve near my home. To this day, even with what Ambassador Aldin has taught me, it is hard to stand here in front of you. My instincts are screaming at me to flee from the predators.”

She pointed to the squirrel Elder with her tail. “This squirrel took me in and taught me how to survive. He wasn’t the local Elder at that time. That first winter, he tried to get me to become his mate. At that point I revealed who I was and spoke ‘Biggen’ to him. He fled from me. After that, I raised orphans until Ambassador Aldin found me. I decided I had lived as a cousin squirrel long enough and should return to civilization. So, if you think what he says is suspect due to knowing me, so be it. As I said, he wasn’t the Elder at that time. He was just a cousin squirrel trying to court me, who he thought was another cousin squirrel who left her mother’s nest too soon.” She turned to the squirrel Elder. “I sorry I scare you off. Was forbidden by Biggen Elders at time. I already have mate. Biggen raccoon carry you here my mate. We mates before I come to forest.”

The squirrel Elder stared at her a moment. “Biggens strange.”

“We can be, Elder,” Butternut replied before returning to her seat.

“Does anyone have any questions for our visitor?” The chancellor looked about. “This is your last chance. Does anyone still doubt they’re sentient like us?” There was silence. The lemur turned back to the squirrel Elder. “Thank you for speaking to us, Elder. We have a lot to discuss thanks to your visit. You may stay and listen if you wish, or you may go back to the healer.”

The Elder paused a moment in thought after listening to the translation and then replied. “I stay longer, I climb wall scream in fear. I very scared. I see Pinecone and Friend no scared. I try hide I scared. I no know how they so brave. So many Biggen predators. I choose leave, go to Biggen healer. When Elders finish, Pinecone come speak. Pinecone explain what Elders choose do. I make Pinecone Voice from Biggens to me.” He let himself back into his cage.” Raoul soon entered and carried him out.