

TWENTY

Four days later, Pinecone arrived at the Elder's room at Hofstra Medical University. Aldin and Butternut escorted her. Butternut went directly over to Raoul and they hugged.

"Is true. Small Biggen squirrel, Butternut, and Biggen Raccoon, Curious, mates."

"Yes, Elder," Butternut replied. "Curious and I mates."

The squirrel Elder nodded and looked to Pinecone. "Speak what Elder Biggens decide."

"Biggen Elders speak and argue among themselves, Elder. Some upset squirrels smart like them. Others pleased we smart like them." Pinecone shook her head. "After speak and argue long time, they speak to other Biggens they Elder to."

The Elder nodded. "Biggen Elders wise speak to other Biggens."

"Most Biggens agree squirrels smart like them. Biggen Elders then speak and argue among themselves about Friend."

Aldin picked-up the narrative. "When I first come among Biggens last summer, Biggens no know what think or do about me. In end they make me Voice for my people. I lost. I no know where my people are, Elder. Is hard to be Voice when I can no find/speak to my Elders. Some Biggens question my story. No believe I from different world. Some think squirrel Elders send me. Prepare Biggens to learn squirrels smart like them." Aldin paused. "This no my world, Elder. Night pinpricks, stars no look same. My people Biggenspeak on own. You know other squirrels who can Biggenspeak? We live in colony, large, shared territory. We tend forests and use Biggen tools. We like squirrels and Biggens both. Is why I say I small Biggen." Aldin drooped his tail. "I can no explain better. Chitterspeak limited. My people use Biggenspeak more than Chitterspeak."

Pinecone continued. "Biggen Elders speak and argue through next day about Friend. In end they agree he like and no like us. They decide squirrel Elders no send him to them. They then make many new rules for Biggens. Now Biggens know squirrels smart, Biggens can no hunt squirrels. If Biggens hunt squirrels. Biggens punished like if hunt Biggens. Place in trap for life." She paused a moment. "Elder, Biggens live long time." She pointed to Raoul and Butternut with her tail. "Currios, Butternut live more than three tens," she held up all ten claws in succession three times, "winters. Biggens can live see twice that many winters."

The Elder's eyes briefly shot wide enough that the others could see he had green irises. He stared at Curious and Butternut.

"Is true," they said in near unison. "We see more than three tens winters each. Biggens grow slower than squirrels. We see more winters."

“Squirrels may join Biggens if choose,” Pinecone stated. “Biggens and squirrels may choose be mates.” She glanced at Raoul and Butternut. “Was forbidden. Exception made for Curious and Butternut because Butternut once Biggen squirrel. Biggen Elders tell Curios, he can only make squirrels sleepy if ask squirrels first and squirrels say yes. Biggens will try save squirrels. Biggens will trap small rodents and release to forests. Small rodents are problem for Biggens. Biggens happy to release rodents in forest. Curious already start doing this.”

The Elder nodded and waited as Pinecone paused a moment.

“Biggen Elders make me Biggen Elder Voice. I go forests, all forests all over world and tell squirrels what Biggen Elders say and do.”

“Why they no send Friend? Elders made him Voice for his people. He look like us. He chitterspeak like us.”

“Elder,” Aldin replied, “Biggen Elders send me with Pinecone. Pinecone smart squirrel. I like smart squirrel/Biggen both. Biggen Elders think squirrels listen more Pinecone speak with me. Would listen less if I speak alone. Like I speak before, Elder, my people different, like squirrel and Biggen both.”

The squirrel Elder smiled. “Biggen Elders wise. I agree, squirrels listen to squirrel more than small Biggen.” He paused a moment in thought and then continued, “Biggen healer give me new teeth. I can no eat for,” he held up ten claws and then six more, “days.”

“Ten and six,” Aldin explained back holding up ten claws followed by six. “Fall harvest time by then.”

The Elder repeated the numbers in chitterspeak. “Yes, busy time. When healer say I may leave, we go my forest first.”

“We?”

The Elder wigwagged his tail up and down once in the affirmative. “Yes. I Elder no more for my forest. I still Elder. I go all forests with you. Squirrels listen more if I speak too. We go my forest first. Speak to Elder there. She pup of pup of pup. I know she will listen.”

“Your great grandpup,” Aldin added in.

The squirrel Elder looked at Aldin a moment in puzzlement.

“My people have more chitterspeak, Elder. Pup of pup we call grandpup. Pup of grandpup we call great grandpup.”

The squirrel Elder wigwagged his tail back and forth a moment in thought. “She my great grandpup. I her great grandsire?”

Aldin wigwagged his tail up and down once. “Yes.”

The squirrel Elder smiled. “I like that. Stay, Elder Friend. Many things we must speak. You share other chitterspeak. Is good learn more chitterspeak. Squirrels forget too much. I think is time squirrels need learn more, forget less.”

Aldin glanced at Raoul and Butternut switching to Common. “I think that means you two can leave. I and Pinecone can serve as translators for the Elder.”

Pinecone translated for the Elder who responded, “No. Things must speak to Curious and Butternut too.”

Raoul and Butternut had started to turn towards the door but paused at the squirrel Elder’s statement. As they turned, Pinecone’s flatpanel suddenly lit-up and shrilled alarmingly, vibrating at the same time. She had never heard it sounded such an alarm before. Butternut, the Elder, and Aldin as one leapt at the walls chattering in panic at the piercing sound. Pinecone yanked it off her back quickly. The screen came on automatically before she could drop it and flee up a wall like the others.

The flatpanel had increased to maximum volume on its own. “Thank the Creator you answered right off, Pinecone!” Jessophat cried out over the flatpanel with tears in his eyes. “I have no time to explain!”

The view on the panel changed to show Twig breathing shallowly. Blood oozed from his nostrils. Blood matted his fur and a few bloody feathers poked out from here and there. He smiled weakly as he saw his mate on the Biggen viewer.

“Friend still protect you. Good,” he chittered weakly.

Pinecone wigwagged her tail distressfully. “What happen?” As she asked, the other squirrels crept back down off the walls. They could easily hear the conversation in chitterspeak.

“Owl try hunt Energy.” Twig panted between sentences struggling to continue. “I see, cry warning. I hunt/kill owl. Save Energy. Owl/I fall. I die soon.” He panted some more, struggling for breath. “You know I no like, no trust Biggens and Biggen tools.” He paused again and shuddered in pain. “This...this good Biggen tool. I see my Pinecone...one more...time. Friend now care...for you...” he trailed off as he exhaled his last breath staring blankly at the screen.

“No!” Pinecone cried out. “No!” she shrilled a second time. She dropped the flatpanel and curled up in a ball and whimpered out a third no. Both the squirrel Elder and Butternut rushed over to try and comfort her.

The view switched back to a teary-eyed Jessophat. “Hello?”

Aldin picked-up the flatpanel. He rotated around to show the three other squirrels in a ball together while also adjusting the volume to a more normal level. "Pinecone is grieving, Jessophat."

Pinecone keened loudly as Butternut and the Elder embraced her. Tears flowed down Butternut's muzzle too as she comforted the squirrel in mourning.

"I'm setting this on record, Jessophat. Please explain what happened. When Pinecone is ready to learn she can then watch it. Go ahead. What happened?"

"Saniel had gone looking for Twig when he hadn't shown-up this morning for the Parliament's wrap-up session where they appointed Pinecone Ambassador to/for cousin squirrels. They spoke for a while with Saniel trying to convince him to come watch. When he refused, Saniel turned to leave. Twig saw the owl silently gliding in to grab Saniel with its talons. He cried-out a warning and leapt, knocking the owl off target, saving Saniel. Twig grappled with the owl, biting through, and breaking one of its wings. He couldn't leap free as they both tumbled to the ground. Saniel fled to us in panic and lead me back. The owl died as a result of the fall. Twig was badly injured but conscious. We couldn't do anything for him. His injuries were too great. All he asked for was to see Pinecone one last time and for us to put him out of his misery. I'm thankful, I didn't need to do the latter." Jessophat slowly shook his head left to right as the tears continued to run down his muzzle. "I've never seen such a huge owl." He panned the flatpanel's camera over the huge dead bird which dwarfed Twig's body. It was nearly as large as a Terran eagle. Aldin shuddered at its size. "It's large enough it could have kill Carulin or I. I must disconnect now as I need to contact local authorities about the owl's death and to ask them to do another search of the area. If there is one this big here, there could be more."

"Is Fousette still there?"

"Yes."

"Ask him if he'd be willing to put his drones to use in that search. Also have him check the footage he's taken. Maybe you'll find something there."

"Will do. Goodbye."

After Jessophat disconnected, Aldin carefully set the flatpanel aside as Pinecone continued to keen in misery as Butternut tried to comfort her. The Elder pulled away and scampered over by Aldin.

"I in way. Butternut like dame comfort Pinecone. Squirrel on Biggin viewer Pinecone mate?"

Aldin wigwagged his tail up and down once. "When Pinecone first answer, was Biggen squirrel Kind. He and his family share their territory with Pinecone. Then her mate, Twig, just before he die. Then Kind again after."

The Elder nodded. "Who Energy?"

“Biggen squirrel pup. Pup of Kind. Biggen name have no meaning in chitterspeak. Pinecone call him Energy. Like all pups he full of energy.”

The Elder squirrel nodded slowly. “Is hard lose mate. I lose,” he held up four claws a moment and remembered the number Curious had given him at some point in their conversations in the room, “four mates. I know how Pinecone feel. Pinecone mate brave hunt predator bird, give life, save Biggen pup.”

“Yes, Twig was brave squirrel,” Aldin agreed drooping his tail.