

TWENTY-THREE

Unlike the previous times in the Biggen flyer, the Elder chose to remain awake and watch the forest fly by quickly. He remembered the Biggen squirrel telling him on the trip from the forest that they would fly fast. He didn't realize how fast the Biggen meant. They were passing between the trees faster than any predator bird he'd ever watched. It was exciting.

"We fly fast," he chittered.

"Yes, Elder, we fly fast," Pinecone agreed. "Wait until we get in bigger Biggen flyer. It fly faster, higher than biggest birds."

The Elder stared at her for a brief moment. Before he could respond, the hovercraft began to slow down. It then slowly drifted to the forest floor touching down gently.

Aldin turned to the Elder. "This was your forest, Elder, before you come among Biggens. Do you go first?"

"Yes, I go first. You two follow. Leave Biggen things here."

He lead them to where his nesting hollow had been, chittering out a greeting. There was no response. He poked his head in. His great grandpup had been busy, having cleaned out the mess he had left behind when he was sick. He could make out that her scent was fresh. She must be nearby. So, he chittered out a greeting loudly. He listened. Faintly, he heard a reply from towards sunrise. He chittered again and this time, definitely heard the reply. A gray form quickly scurried through the treetops and nearly knocked him off the branch as he was embraced tightly. His great grandpup nuzzled him fondly, wrapping her tail around him.

"Sir of sir of sir live!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, Elder, your great grandsire live." She looked at him with a bit of puzzlement at the term. He continued. "While I with Biggens I learn more chitterspeak. This one," he pointed to Aldin with his tail, "teach me. Sire of sire is grandsire. Sire of sire of sire is great grandsire. Pup of pup is grandpup. Pup of pup of pup is great grandpup."

"I like the new words, Great Grandsire. Now you back, you Elder again?"

The former squirrel Elder drooped his tail. "Elder council must decide if I may stay. I go among Biggens."

"You could no flee from Biggen squirrel who take you."

"You know I chose go to Biggens, Great Grandpup. As Elder, you know rule."

"You have no good chose, Great Grandsire. You go to Biggens or you die." She paused a moment. "I summon Elder Council. Is harvest time. No know who among Elders will come."

She chattered out loudly, paused, chattered a second time, paused and chattered a third time. Very distantly from all four directions a reply faintly echoed through the trees.

Aldin leaned over and quietly nervously whispered to Pinecone, "It's the same call our Council of Elders use when they must meet."

The female Elder nodded after hearing the distant replies. She turned back to her great grandfather and looked at the other two squirrels. "Who they?"

"Our story long, Elder," Aldin replied bowing to her. "If wait for other Elders then I only need speak once."

"As he speak, our story long, Elder." She pointed back through the forest with her tail. "We come from Biggens with your old Elder in Biggen flyer. Flyer sit on forest floor over there. We bring food. Share with squirrel Elders."

The Elder nodded. Aldin and Pinecone darted back towards the flyer. "Who are they?" she asked her great grandfather.

"As they speak, long story, Elder. She squirrel like us. She live with Biggen squirrels. Learn Biggen. Use Biggen tool to speak Biggenspeak to Biggens. He," the former Elder paused a moment shaking his head. "He like smart squirrels before fire in Biggen origin story." Her eyes shot wide briefly as he continued. "He can speak Biggenspeak on own. He live with Biggens. He no know where his people are, they like squirrel and Biggen both. Is why I think he like old smart squirrels." He did not say more as Aldin and Pinecone returned with backpacks.

"Biggen sack tool," Aldin explained. "Can carry much food in one trip." He wiggled it off and opened the flap to show the female Elder.

She stared. "It take a paw span of trips to carry that much food to nest."

Before she could say more another squirrel leapt from a nearby tree landing on the branch near theirs. It wigwagged its tail a few times staring. "Old Elder? You no dead?"

The former Elder smiled. "I live, old friend." He embraced the other squirrel.

"How you live? Your pup of pup of pup say you near death when Biggen squirrel take you."

"We wait for others, then we each only need speak once."

"Old Elder still wise Elder."

In half a paw span (roughly 50 cclicks) three more squirrels arrived. Aldin and Pinecone demonstrated their backpacks and shared food with the others. The Old Elder started with his part of the story. When he finished, Pinecone explained her background. Then Aldin did

likewise. Both he and Pinecone then explained the new rules the Biggen Elders had made. Their audience was surprised and also nervous at the news.

“We must first decide about old Elder,” one of them stated. “He break rule, chose go among Biggens.”

“I can no make decide, he my Great Grandsire.”

The other four looked at her in puzzlement a moment until Aldin explained the term. They liked it and nodded thanking him.

“We understand you can no decide, Great Grandpup of old Elder. We must discuss private both about old Elder and rules from Biggens. Return shortly.” The four squirrels darted off through the trees just far enough to not be heard and settled in a small circle on a few branches, quietly chittering back and forth. Briefly all four raised their tails in unison. Again, Aldin leaned over to Pinecone letting her know his Elders voted by show of tails also. They then returned. The same one who spoke before spoke again. “We have discussed and we agree, Old Elder break rule. He have no chose. Go to Biggens or die. He may return to forest, but he Elder of this forest no more. You remain Elder this part of forest, Great Grandpup of old Elder.”

“Thank you,” The old Elder replied bowing his head in thanks.

The Elder who had spoken for the others looked at him in puzzlement. Pinecone stepped in and explained the best she could what the sentiment meant and then pointed to Aldin. “His people have more chitterspeak. We learn chitterspeak word from him.”

The Elder flicked his tail up and down once indicating he understood. “News you bring from Biggen Elders troubling. Is good they offer help squirrels. Is bad they offer let squirrels live with Biggens. If squirrels leave forest, forest die. Forest die, all die. We must be careful in how we speak to others about this.”

“Elders, not all Biggens live among Biggens,” Pinecone responded. “Biggen squirrels I share territory with are more like big squirrels than Biggen squirrels. There are Biggen things they do, yes. They climb trees like squirrels. I teach them how build dreys. They build good, strong dreys just like squirrels. They only go to Biggen places when must. Spend more time in forest than in Biggen places.

“Yes, some squirrels will join Biggens. I no think they will stay long,” she continued. “Too different. I glad to be in a forest again. Was hard to be with Biggen Elders. Many predators. Biggen predators no hunt Biggen prey. I still scared when with Biggen Elders.”

“Is true,” the old Elder interjected. “I watch Pinecone hug Biggen bobcat like a dame hugs her pup. Biggen bobcat then hold still let me sniff. I no smell any blood in bobcat fur. She no hunt prey! Some Biggens very strange.”

“I think in time, other Biggens may become more like those I share territory with,” Pinecone continued. “They will become more like big squirrels.”

“Or like the small Biggen who act like dame to pups who lose dame and sire,” the Old Elder added.

“What happen to small Biggen?” one of the others asked. “She gone from her territory last spring. Did predator kill/eat her?”

“She return to her territory among Biggens and to her mate,” Aldin answered. “She now Biggen Elder. Her mate is Biggen raccoon who make squirrels sleepy. Biggen Elders order him no make squirrels sleepy no more. Must ask first.”

“Some Biggens very strange,” the former Elder said again. “Sometimes choose mate not same as them. Biggen raccoon and squirrel can no make pups. They still mates.”

“Not all Biggen tools bad. These,” she pointed to the backpacks they had shared food out of, “good Biggen tool. Can carry much food in these...”

“My people call this tool a backpack,” Aldin added. “We bring many with us in Biggen flyer. We share with squirrels who wish to use/have them. Make fall harvest easier.” He glanced towards the old Elder.

“I asked they bring these...” the former Elder paused a moment trying to work out chittering the new word, “backpacks. I see how useful this tool is while I with Biggen healer. I see many things while with Biggen healer. Some like these are useful. No danger I see if squirrels use this tool. Others, I no want squirrels to see or use.”

Aldin demonstrated how to put a backpack on and take it off along with how to open the top flap. Two of the Elders accepted them. Two refused. The former Elder’s Great Grandpup also accepted one. Aldin and Pinecone set down two more on the branch they sat on. He looked at the former Elder’s Great Grandpup. “Can you store these in case they” He pointed to the two who refused the Biggen tool with his tail. “change minds after we leave.” He pointed to the two who took the packs. “They wise. Take backpack full of seeds and nuts. They no need use tool after returning to their territory if fear use Biggen tool. They get as much food as need paw span to gather by taking backpack as you say earlier.”

That got the two holdouts to hesitantly take a backpack each.

“If you decide you like this tool and it no cause harm to other squirrels to have, let this Elder, Great Grandpup of old Elder, know. We leave some with her to share. A Biggen squirrel will come later,” he paused and looked the old Elder’s Great Grandpup, “same Biggen squirrel who take him,” he pointed to the former Elder with his tail, “to Biggen healer. He will offer more backpacks if they are wanted. Now, we must leave. Have many, many more forests to speak Biggen Elder’s rules to.”

Pinecone and Aldin headed back towards the hovercraft. The old Elder stayed behind briefly.

“I go with Friend and Pinecone,” the former Elder stated.

“Elder Council rule you may stay, Great Grandsire.”

“I will return after we see all other forests and speak to all other Elder squirrels, Great Grandpup. They need Elder squirrel with them. Many, many forests to visit. Small Biggen Elder Friend say winter come when we finish. Biggens promise I no starve through winter. Will give me food.” He paused a moment. “Maybe we find Friend’s people. Great Grandpup, I think Friend’s people are squirrels who flee fire long ago.”

Her eyes widened again as he embraced her in farewell.

“I hope you find them,” she replied. “Is good you live, Great Grandsire. I will miss you.”

“As I you, Great Grandpup, wise forest Elder.”

The former Elder then followed Pinecone and Aldin back to the hovercraft.