

TWENTY-SIX

“NO!!!” Pinecone screeched a second time before she buried her muzzle into the Elder’s shoulder sobbing, “No, no again.” The Elder did his best to comfort her, while urging her their need to keep running.

“We need to keep moving, Pinecone. Friend lure owl so we can flee. We must flee, no waste sacrifice Friend...” he trailed off a moment staring down at the owl. “Pinecone, look!”

Aldin scrambled under the snow, barely avoiding the grabbing talons of the giant owl, chattering fearfully, trying to fight down the panic. He kept digging, pulling himself further away from the owl. He poked back up out of the snow 2 mits away from the bird. He leapt through the snow as quickly as he could towards the open hovercraft. The owl struggled to pull itself out of the snow, finally pushing itself into the air, flapping its huge wings. Aldin jumped into the hovercraft and scrambled to one side, pushing himself against the wall. The giant owl just missed him as it landed on the floor of the hovercraft, skidding across the smooth surface to the far wall, slamming into it with a loud thump. The hovercraft shook from the impact.

Aldin didn’t waste a moment, scrambling back out, calling out, “Close Door!” as he leapt back out in the snow. The door closed not a moment too soon as the owl slammed into the clear dome portion of the door. It hooted and scratched at the dome and interior of the craft, flapping its wings wildly. Aldin fled up the nearest tree, putting the trunk between him and the hovercraft. He soon found the other two.

“Why you two no flee!? Flyer no trap owl long. Owl break free soon! We must flee!”

“She no flee without mate,” the former Elder replied.

Pinecone responded by embracing Aldin tightly, wrapping her tail around him and nuzzling him. “Friend no do that again!” she chided him nipping him in the shoulder enough to hurt, but not enough to break the skin like he had been a naughty pup. “I lose first mate to owl. I no lose Friend same way!” There were tears in her eyes. He embraced her back and slowly rocked with her as she cried into his shoulder. He kept an eye on the hovercraft.

Down below, the owl continued to thrash about inside the hovercraft. Smoke suddenly began to fill the cabin. Flames soon erupted from the floor and enveloped the interior. A portion of the dome melted, and thick black smoke billowed into the sky. Aldin nervously wigwagged his tail. “Owl burn die or we need flee fast.”

All three of them sat in silence on the tree branch nervously wigwagging their tails watching the hovercraft burn. There was no movement from within other than the hungry, loud flames and the resulting deep, black smoke.

“What cause fire?” the Elder asked.

“We speak this before, Elder, as we go from forest to forest. Biggens use energy like lightning to power flyer. Energy stored below floor of flyer. Owl try escape flyer damage floor. Damage floor damage energy storage. Energy all quickly escape make fire.”

They watched a little longer. “Owl must be dead,” Aldin decided. “We go find squirrel who warn us. Thank squirrel. Seek local Elder. Kind will see smoke. He come look for us. You see.”

“Dame?” Pinecone darted ahead of the others to the squirrel on a branch ahead of them. The two sniffed each other and embraced. “Dame!” Pinecone exclaimed again.

“My pup chased off so long ago live. Is good you come.” She drooped her tail. “Only few squirrels left. Large predator bird kill eat most.” She then saw Aldin and the former Elder. “Who they? I saw Biggen flyer burn.” She looked past them nervously. “Where Biggen?”

The Elder and Aldin held still as Pinecone’s mother sniffed them over. She looked first at the Elder. “You squirrel.” She looked at Aldin. “You like squirrel no like squirrel. Smell different. I smell pup on you.”

“Is long story, Dame of Pinecone,” Aldin stated. “We come seek squirrel Elder. Need call council. Would prefer speak tale only once.”

Pinecone’s mother sighchittered as a few tears fell from her eyes. “Predator bird kill eat most. Predatory bird kill/eat old Elder. I oldest now. Makes me Elder. Speak your story.”

They let Pinecone speak first as she had the most to tell her mother. Two clicks went by. A faint chitter warning came through the trees. Pinecone’s mother’s ears twitched.

“Biggens come. We must hide.”

“You may hide, Elder. I go meet Biggens.”

She chattered in warning. “Must no trust Biggens.”

Aldin gigglechittered and then spoke in Biggenspeak, “You seem to trust me just fine, Elder.” Her eyes widened at the sound. He translated it in chitterspeak and added, “I small Biggen. Is why I smell different.” He darted through the treetops before she could chitter anything else.

Pinecone’s mother stared at Aldin as he made his way back towards the burnt Biggen flyer as another larger one arrived and floated down to the snow-covered forest floor near the other. She then looked at the former Elder and her daughter.

“There is much to speak still, Elder,” the former Elder stated. “That one’s Biggen name means Friend. His people like us and Biggen both. He call self, Small Biggen. I think his people squirrels who flee fire long ago. I travel all over world with your pup and Friend. We no find his people.” The former Elder drooped his tail. “I hoped we find his people.”

“Friend say this no his world. He come from different world,” Pinecone added. “Biggens think night pinpricks like sun far, far away. Just like looking at Friend and Biggen squirrel now.”

As they conversed, they watched a Biggen squirrel exit the second flyer. It and Aldin spoke briefly. The Biggen poked at the first burnt flyer with long pole. Aldin then cautiously went into the burnt remains. He return to the Biggen with something in his mouth. He then began to lead the Biggen squirrel back towards them.

“They look very small, but they no shrink, just further away make look small. Biggens think same for night pinpricks. Friend think his world near far, far away pinprick sun. Small Biggen, Friend, my mate, Dame,” Pinecone added.

Her mother looked at her. “Yes, Pup must speak more about mate later.”

Aldin returned with Jessophat. The Biggen squirrel kept his distance.

Pinecone introduced Jessophat. “Dame, this Biggen called Kind. I share territory with Kind and his mate. He no threat. I choose name, Kind, for him. Biggen name have no meaning in Chitterspeak.”

Pinecone’s mother waved him forward with her tail. He slowly approached her and then held still while the squirrel nervously sniffed him over.

“You smell like that one,” she said pointing to Aldin with her tail. “Squirrel but different.”

“Elder, I share my territory with your pup, Pinecone. Owl dead. Friend” he pointed to Aldin with his tail, “trap owl in Biggen flyer. Flyer burn, Owl burn, die. You now safe from owl.”

Meanwhile, Aldin pulled what looked like a hunk of something burnt out of his mouth and held it with his forepaws. He nibbled at it and made a face like a pup who nibble a rotten nut. They all stared at him and he drooped his tail.

“I trap owl in flyer. Flyer burn. Owl no escape fire, die. I trap owl kill owl. Rule my people, Elder. You kill, you eat kill. Fire-burned owl no taste good. I still try eat. I obey rule.”

They briefly stared at him some more as he nibbled some more, again making a face at the taste. Jessophat turned back to the Elder and continued what he was saying before the distraction.

“Friend tell me owl hunt kill, eat most squirrels. Is strange owl hunt in day. Owl should hunt in night no day. Elder, why owl hunt in day?”

Pinecone's mother hesitated at the strange word, 'owl' they had been using.

Aldin paused between bites of burnt owl meat to explain, "Elder, my mate Dame, my people like squirrels and Biggens both. We have more chitterspeak. Owl is name we use large predator bird who no noise hunt your people." He nibbled again at the burnt owl meat he held in his forepaws and made another face at the taste. "I think I eat enough owl to meet you kill you eat rule." He released the burnt owl meat and it tumbled through the branches of the tree down to the snow below.

Pinecone's mother nodded and tried the new word as it was easier to say than giant predator bird in chitterspeak.

She held up two claws, "Owls start hunt squirrels summer sunrise and sunset. Squirrels leave nests later and return earlier. Try starve owls make owls leave. Owls no leave. Owls change. Hunt all day. One owl stop hunt start harvest time. Other owl still hunt to now. Owl hunt/kill most squirrels." She drooped her tail.

"Dame, Friend my two," Pinecone held up two claws, "mate. First mate hunt/kill other owl start harvest." She drooped her tail. "He die as hunt/kill owl. Save Kind's pup from owl."

Jessophat nodded. "How many squirrels live, Elder?"

Pinecone's mother looked at the Biggen squirrel while wigwagging her tail nervously. "Why I answer Biggen question?"

"Forest needs squirrels, Elder," Jessophat responded patiently. "Pinecone speak her first mate hunt/kill other owl start harvest. This owl hunt/kill your people harvest start to now. Hard gather food with owl hunting you during day. I guess you no have food for whole winter. Pinecone's old mate save my pup. I help squirrels. Food, shelter, I share with squirrels. I share territory with squirrels. Help squirrels survive winter. In spring squirrels go back to forest. Squirrels help me, I help squirrels."

"Is why I call him, Kind, Dame," Pinecone added. "When others chase me away, I turn to Kind for help. I freeze die or trust Biggens. They keep me warm, safe through winter. In spring I no pup forever."

Pinecone's mother seemed to weigh things in her head a moment and flicked her tail up and down once. She called out a loud, long chatter. She paused, chattered a second time, paused again, and chattered a third time. In the distance the others heard the call taken up. Within 15 cekklicks, the branches around them were filled with a couple dozen squirrels. They wigwagged their tails nervously seeing the Biggen squirrel near their Elder.

Pinecone's mother turned to Jessophat gesturing around with a forepaw. "Look, Biggen squirrel called Kind. These all squirrels who live. You have food feed all through winter?"

"Elder, I have plenty food for all here. No squirrel starve. No squirrel freeze die."

She turned and addressed the others. “My chased away pup returns. Brings friends. Pup’s first mate hunt/kill one predator bird. That one,” she pointed to Aldin with her tail, “Pup’s two mate, “she held-up two claws. “squirrel, no squirrel. Smell like Biggen. He hunt/kill other large predator bird. He call bird, owl. Rule his people, you hunt/kill, you eat. I see him eat some owl. He turn predator bird into prey.”

The others cheered at the news. Pinecone’s mother continued, pointing to Jessophat with her tail. “This Biggen squirrel is one with territory to sunset of our forest. He offer help us.” The others chattered nervously, but quickly quieted when she looked at them again. “Yes, I, Elder, know rule. I decide this different.” She looked to Jessophat, “Speak, Kind, as you speak me just now.”

“Thank you, Elder.”

She looked to him in puzzlement at the term. Pinecone explained it. Jessophat then repeated his tale expanding on how he shared his territory with Pinecone and her previous mate, Twig. How Twig saved his pup, dying in the process and his offer to feed and shelter them through the winter.

“I, Elder,” Pinecone’s mother stated. “I no order you trust Biggen. I can no choose for you. You must each choose on own. I no have enough food for winter. I will trust this Biggen, my pup’s friend. Easy chose, trust Biggen, live. No trust Biggen, starve/freeze die.”

“Before squirrels decide, hear this,” Pinecone jumped in. “I no speak this yet to Elder. Kind come before I can speak this. I speak to Biggen Elders at Biggen Elder meeting place, far from here...” She explained briefly about her meeting, how the former Elder came to speak to them too, and the new rules the Biggen Elders put forth in regard to squirrels. “...Kind is more like giant squirrel than Biggen. He climb trees like us. Build drey in summer. Live in tree hollow in winter. He Biggen I trust. Trust Kind, you live, see spring.”

The squirrels chattered quietly among themselves. Jessophat glanced back towards the hovercraft. “I give you space speak freely. I must go speak to other Biggens. Tell them what happen here.” He darted back through the trees.

The squirrels gathered closer together and raised their voices chattering back and forth in debate whether to trust the Biggen or not. The former Elder leaned into and whispered to Pinecone’s mother. She flicked her tail up and down once in agreement and let out a brief piercing whistle. The others all fell silent looking to their Elder.

She pointed to the former Elder. “He Elder from different forest. He speak. Listen.”

He bowed his head slightly to her and spoke. “This no my forest. I no your Elder. I was Elder different forest. This my ten and one,” he held up all ten claws and one more, “winter.” This caused the others to chatter nervously. He was Elder than old Elder who see eight winters before owl hunt/eat him. They immediately quieted down and gave him their full attention. “Summer, I broke tooth. Tooth rot. I get sick, can no eat. Slowly starve die. Starve die awful. You turn

weak. You turn cold. In summer while starve die, I cold. Try keep warm in tree hollow. No stay warm. Biggen squirrel, no Kind, different Biggen squirrel come to my forest. Ask speak to Elder. Speak his Elders send him seek squirrel Elder advice. I very weak when he come. Too weak to flee. He ask what make me sick. I say. He offer take me to Biggen healer. I choose go. Why? I stay, I know I die. I go, I might die, I might live. Even if I become pup forever as dame warn me long ago, is better live than die. Biggen healer heal me give me new tooth. I no pup forever. I still like Elder before I broke tooth. Your Elder say you must choose on own." He glanced at her briefly. "She wise Elder. Wise Elder no force squirrels in choose like this. Show of tails. How many have food last to spring?"

Not a single tail was raised. All drooped them downward instead.

"If you no have food to last to spring and you choose no accept Biggen help, you starve/freeze die. Choose no hard. Stave/freeze die or live. Why you argue? Choose no different than for me in summer. I speak is better live. You afraid Biggen make you pup forever? I speak is better pup forever than starve/freeze die. Kind very generous. I stay with Kind for last storm. If I eat all food he give me in storm I large as drey. Is all I speak."

There was little more debate after the former Elder's speech. They accepted Jessophat's offer, though some did so with hesitation.