

PROLOGUE

(CHATTER!) “My territory! Intruder LEAVE!”

Aldin held his “ground” on the tree branch cautiously wigwagging his tale as the male squirrel charged at him. He stopped short when Aldin did not flee nor try to fight back. He stared at Aldin a moment and recognized his tail with the missing tip.

“Small Biggen, Friend?” the squirrel asked in chitterspeak.

(affirmativeflick) “I come check. See if you need leave.”

“I well. Mate well. Mate feeding our pups. I no leave. This mate and my territory. Nest tight. Last litter weened, still here.”

Aldin smiled. “I tell Butternut. She be proud. I bring gift from Butternut. Seeds. Enough for you and mate for,” he held up three claws, “three days.” Aldin tapped the backpack on the branch next to him with his tale.”

“You no stay. Mate no like Biggens.”

Aldin nodded. “Show me where leave seed and I leave.”

“I show and share story on way, then you leave. Story tell why mate no like Biggens. Mate tell pups last litter this story. I no hear story before. My dame no speak me and litter mates story. No know if she know story.” His tail drooped. “If dame know story she die before she speak story.”

“Mate say this story speak by dame to pups and by dame before and before many, many times. She no know how far back. Long, long time ago. Different Biggens then. No like Biggens now. Strange Biggens have little fur, stand and walk on back legs. Big as bears. Biggens predators. Biggens prey on all other animals and on each other. Biggens know many things. Biggens take squirrels and make smart like our Biggens. Smart squirrels escape from Biggens, fear Biggens eat them. Smart squirrels live deep in forest far from strange Biggens.

“Biggens no wise. Biggens think they wise and control all. Biggens make big fire. Biggens no control fire. Fire top predator. Fire grow and grow, burn, and eat around whole world. All Biggens die. Most animals, prey, predators, birds all die. Fire kill, eat all. Burn and eat all trees and plants. Smart squirrels know many things when fire come. They no know how stop fire. Some flee from fire, go far, far away and no return. No all escape. Those no escape hide in burrows like woodchucks. Burrows full of food, nuts and seeds. Some other animals also hide in burrows. After fire eat all on surface, have no more to eat, it starve and die.

“Then animals who hide in burrows come out. Smart squirrels replant forest. Smart squirrel elders fear fire. Elders fear squirrels make mistake like old Biggens and fire come back. Elders command smart squirrels forget Biggen ways. Is only way stop fire come back. Most obey. That is why we no like Biggens now. Some smart squirrels no obey elders. They chased away from

forest. In time they grow big and turn into our Biggens. They grow lonely and make other Biggens. Mate warn pups no trust Biggens. Danger. Trust Biggens you forget how live like squirrel. Become pup forever.”

Through the retelling of the tale, they had made their way to a tree hollow within which Aldin empty his backpack of the seeds and nuts. They had travelled most of the way back as Butternut’s gradnpup finished. He paused and looked at Aldin.

“Not all Biggens bad. You, Granddame Butternut, Grandsire Curious, and Biggen squirrel with name no meaning chitterspeak no bad.” Again, he drooped his tail. “Mate think different. Tell Grandame Butternut,” he paused a moment. “No recall word you say once.”

“Thank you?”

“Yes. Tell Granddam I say thank you.” He paused again. “Thank you for all.”

Aldin nodded and returned to Nadowahoc College. He quickly sought out Raoul and relayed the tale to him. Raoul informed him he had heard a similar tale before elsewhere. However, he appreciated the second source.

ONE

“I am thankful you are able to work this trip into your schedule, Ambassador.”

Aldin nodded at the woodchuck who had spoken sitting across from him on the flitter and glanced at the raccoon next to him before replying. “It is my pleasure, Fousette. And it was easy to work this in as I already have business to conduct in Central Lakes and Forests District. I’m just sorry Dr. Kaynobble’s wife couldn’t join us. Though, it’s obvious why Representative Butternut could not do so.”

Raoul sighed. “Yes, I was hoping we could do this trip earlier in the summer before the next session of Parliament started. It took longer for Fousette’s people to go through our video footage than anticipated.” He glanced at the woodchuck, “I don’t blame you. I simply underestimated how much footage I had.”

“Well, at least I think I’ve got some of the basics down on wild cousin chitterspeak,” Fousette replied.

Raoul turned back to Aldin. “Here’s hoping the 808th Parliament can complete all their business through video conference. Butternut is still unsure of her ability to quell the wild cousin fear within her.”

“It takes practice,” Aldin responded, “as I’ve tried to reassure her and you. She barely left paw prints the last time Mara visited to let her practice.”

“Mara? Past Chancellor Mara?” Fousette asked.

Aldin nodded. “We’re good friends, so she agreed to help. And it’s been helpful.” He looked again at Raoul Kaynobble. “Now, why exactly are we travelling to Central Lakes and Forests District? While I’ve got some business to attend to, you haven’t said much as to why you and Fousette are travelling. You said it’s to see an old friend, but what does that have to do with Fousette’s documentary work?”

Raoul sighed again. “It is a long story. This friend is also where I first heard the ‘Biggen’ creation tale you heard in the forest preserve this past spring, Ambassador. As this is a long flight, I’ll try to explain it the best I can. It all started about a year before you arrived among us...”

Raoul sat in his office at Nadowahoc College going over some exams when his flatpanel chimed. He answered it and saw a citizen squirrel on screen with peppery gray fur and rounded ears.

“Dr. Kaynobble of Nadowahoc College?”

“Speaking. Who are you?”

The squirrel looked relieved. “My name is Jessophat. I’ve been bounced around from person to person trying to find someone who can help me. Well, help a family friend anyway. Everyone I contacted said I need to try someone else until the last one said I really should try you as you are an expert on wild cousin squirrels.”

“That is my specialty, Jessophat.”

Jessophat’s eyes darted about briefly and he lowered his voice slightly. “Please promise me you won’t cut me off and disconnect my call if you think I’m crazy.” He paused a moment as Raoul raised one eyebrow. “Wild cousin squirrels aren’t dumb animals. They’re self-aware.”

Raoul stared at the squirrel a moment.

“You do think I’m crazy, don’t you?”

Raoul sat back and shook his head in the negative. “No, I don’t think you’re crazy, Jessophat. I’ve been studying them for some time. I agree with you, but I haven’t got enough data to go public on it. How did you come to this conclusion?”

Jessophat glanced off-screen and then moved over. A smaller peppery gray furred squirrel with rounded ears came forward. It chittered and wigwagged its tail. “Hello, Biggen elder raccoon,” it spoke nervously in chitterspeak. “Biggen Squirrels call me Pinecone.”

Raoul looked to his two fellow travelers. “That first video meeting lasted nearly a klick¹. I quickly rearranged my teaching schedule, booked a flitter flight, and went out to meet Pinecone, Jessophat, and his family...”

TWO

Raoul had been following the path he had been instructed to follow from town for about 50 ceklicks². He was starting to wonder if he had misunderstood when someone chittered from a tree above him. He was slightly startled as Jessophat scrambled down the tree and dropped onto the path next to him. The squirrel offered a paw to the raccoon.

“I’m so glad you made it, Dr. Kaynobble.”

Raoul noted as he shook hands that Jessophat’s fingernails were claw-like and long. “Well, I was starting to wonder if I had the right trail, Jessophat. You may call me by my first name, Raoul, if you wish.”

“Thank you, Raoul. Our home is off the trail this way.” He lead Raoul to the right into the woods several hundred mits³. “As I explained in our videocall, my family lives rather close to nature. Our nearest neighbors are back in town. They think we’re a bit crazy, but we’re happy with our ‘off-grid’ lifestyle.” He drooped his tail a moment as they arrived in front of a huge butternut tree. Raoul estimated it was at least 8 mits in diameter. “And I forget that others may not be comfortable with that. While we have a guest room near ground level, most of our living space is about 15 or so mits above ground.” He opened a door that blended in with the tree trunk and gestured his guest to enter first.

Raoul looked around and noted it wasn’t a huge space, but it didn’t feel cramped either. There was a table, several cushions and an entertainment panel on the wall. An open doorway at the far end led to a small washroom.

“What little power we need, we get through solar panels in the top of our tree. We’re too far out from town to tap into their power grid. And we’re fine with that. Make yourself comfortable. My wife, our child, and Pinecone should join us shortly. You’re welcome to stay in this space rather

¹ Klick-hour

² Ceklick-minute, on new Earth there are 100 ceklicks in a klick

³ Mit-meter

than hike back to town every evening. We can bring meals down to you or drop a rope ladder down the backside of the tree so you can climb up.”

“Jessophat, that’s very kind of you to offer me a place to stay should I find I need to spend the night. In my line of work, I’m used to ‘roughing it’ and this space is more than I get to use in some of my research. Also, I am quite capable of climbing to the height of the rest of your home if necessary, though a ladder would make it easier. My wild cousins are nearly as good climbers as yours and I’ve gotten a lot of practice in, though I can’t go down a tree headfirst like a squirrel. I will say, you’re the first non-wild cousin squirrel I’ve met who climbs like a wild cousin.”

Jessophat wigwagged his tail back and forth a couple times. “Like I said, our neighbors think we’re a bit crazy due to our chosen lifestyle. We live closer to nature like our wild cousins. There is less impact on the land that way. We’re quite happy with it, though we realize it’s not for everyone. All a squirrel needs to do to learn to climb is let their claws grow out. Then, it’s just a matter of practice. Of course, that makes it a bit of a challenge to use a flatpanel. We have to put stoppers over our claws to protect the glass.”

A younger squirrel bounded in on all fours. “Dad!” he skidded to a halt seeing Raoul and sat up, his tail wigwagging quickly.

“Saniel, this is Dr. Raoul Kaynobble, the wild cousin squirrel expert we were expecting.”

The young squirrel bowed to Raoul and offered his paw in a handshake. “Glad to meet you, Dr. Kaynobble.”

“Where’s your mother and Pinecone?”

“Up near my summer drey, Dad. Pinecone is scared and Mom is staying with her at her request. Mom sent me to get you. Could she be scared because of Dr. Kaynobble?”

“Probably.”

“Let your mother know I’ll be up shortly.” Saniel ducked back out. His scrambling up the tree could be heard within the room.

“I’ll follow,” Raoul stated.

“Are you sure?”

“In the worst-case scenario, Pinecone will flee. Or she’ll work up the courage to come sniff me.”

“As you wish. You’re the wild cousin expert. It’ll only take a moment to unroll the ladder.”

Jessophat nimbly scrambled up the huge tree. Though slower, Raoul scaled up the 15 mits to the main level of their home. He was thankful for the ladder. This tree was too large for him to easily

climb without the ladder. Above this, the main trunk split into smaller trunks and branches. He could barely make out Saniel's summer drey up one of the smaller branches another 5 or so mits up. It blended in well with the surrounding leaves, much like a wild cousin's drey would. He judged it probably wouldn't support his weight with three citizen squirrels and a wild cousin already on it.

"This is as far as I can safely go," he called up. He could easily hear the warning scree and sighed. He called out in chitterspeak. "Why Pinecone afraid? Biggen raccoon elder no predator. Come sniff. I no bite. I no hunt squirrel. You ask me come here. I come."

It took several ceklicks for the wild cousin squirrel to fight down her fear and come near Raoul. He held still while she sniffed him, chittering nervously. Finally, she looked up at him.

"I try be brave. Hard."

"You very brave, little one. My name in Biggen is," Raoul switched to Common and then back to chitterspeak, "Raoul. In chitterspeak I am called Curious."

"I learn hear some Biggen, wise elder Curious, can no speak Biggen. No word in chitterspeak." Pinecone held a paw to her throat. "Different here, no like Biggen here."

Raoul switched to Common. "You do not have vocal cords like Biggen."

(affirmativeflick)

Raoul raised an eyebrow as he switched back to chitterspeak. "You call Curious wise elder. I no wise elder." He switched back to Common. "I think will learn a lot from you, Pinceone."

THREE

Raoul shared the evening meal with Jessophat's family. As they ate, he asked, "So, how did it come about that your family befriended Pinecone?"

Jessophat paused in his nibbling and looked to Pinecone. "Do you wish to tell your story rather than me?" He asked her in Common.

(negativeflick) "Biggen has more words, better words. You speak. I add if need."

Jessophat nodded. "Very well. Raoul, soon after Pinecone had grown up and needed to find and establish her own territory, she came into our 'territory' not knowing we lived here. She came nearly muzzle-to-muzzle with me. She froze, stared at me briefly, turned, crying out 'Biggen' in chitterspeak as she fled. I had never heard the term before. Pinecone would later explain it is

what they call us larger species. Back to the tale. Pinecone didn't go far before running into my wife."

Carulin gigglechittered. "The poor thing was scared out of her wits as she turned in a different direction to flee only to see Saniel blocking her escape route. She froze in place. 'Biggens kill quick?' she pleaded as we surrounded her."

Jessophat picked up the tale. "'No,' I said in chitterspeak. 'We no kill squirrel. You stay if choose stay. We share territory. Plenty food. You welcome here. Forest need more squirrels.' I backed off allowing her an escape route and she fled off through the trees, screeing fearfully."

"Two days later I encountered her again elsewhere on our property. This time she didn't flee immediately. She watched me and called out, 'This Biggen territory?'"

"'Yes,' I chittered back, 'Biggens need big territory. Plenty food. You stay if choose stay.' I backed off and she did not flee."

"Is good territory, much food, few predators," Pinecone chimmed in. "I chose stay." She then drooped her tail. "Good and bad chose stay."

"What was bad about your choice?" Raoul asked when Pinecone didn't add more.

"Other squirrels know this Biggen territory. Other squirrels no come near. Other squirrels now fear me. Call out 'Biggen, flee!' when I come near." Pinecone drooped her tail. "I no Biggen. I squirrel."

"Raoul, as you've studied wild cousin squirrels, do they tolerate others in their territory?" Carulin asked.

"Only when looking for a mate or to share warmth in the winter."

Carulin nodded. "That first winter Pinecone could not snuggle down with other wild cousins to keep warm. They would chase her off or flee from her because we let her live in our territory. The winters here can get very cold. 20 to 30 below zero before windchill. After the first cold snap she sought us out. She was near half-frozen to death when we took her into our home. She spent the rest of the winter with us. We improved our chitterspeak and she learned to understand 'Biggenspeak.'"

Pinecone added as she drooped her tail. "I scared. Dame warn me when pup. No trust Biggens. Trust Biggens be pup forever. I need trust Biggens. I freeze die if no trust Biggens. Better pup forever than freeze die."

"That was two years ago," Jessophat stated. "Other wild cousin squirrels still won't let her come near."

“I no find mate.” (drooptail) “I try. Get one male follow me. He flee when we come into share Biggen territory.”

“Since then, she has become a member of our family. But she is no pup as her mother had warned she’d become.”

“I no pup.” Pinecone agreed. She gestured to the others. “They no like other Biggens. They like big squirrels. If I Biggen or they squirrels we choose each other. I know Biggen elders forbid.” She drooped her tail. “If no forbid, be mates.”

Raoul raised an eyebrow as he looked at Pinecone and his hosts.

Jessophat nodded. “As I said she has become a member of our family. If it were legal, we would welcome her into our marriage. We’ve learned a lot from her and she has learned a lot from us.”

“Pinecone taught us how to build dreys,” Saniel added in.

Pinecone pointed to Saniel with her tail. “Wise pup, quick learn.”

“And they are more comfortable for summer sleeping than any of us anticipated,” Jessophat added.

Raoul turned again to Pinecone. “You teach Biggens build drey. You teach Biggens chitterspeak. You learn hear Biggenspeak. You call me wise elder. No, you wise like elder.”

Pinecone hid her face in her tail a moment at the praise. When she looked up again, she responded, “Curious kind racoon elder. I speak stories to Biggens. Pass time in storms.”

Raoul raised an eyebrow. “Really? Would you share a story with me?”

She looked to the others. They nodded at her and offered words of encouragement.

“Tell him the one about the old Biggens,” Saniel suggested. “I like that one.”

“Old Biggens?” Raoul asked.

Pinecone hesitated a moment in thought. “Yes, that good one. Explain why others chase me away. I tell after clean.”

“And so, Pinecone told me the very tale you heard in the forest preserve, Ambassador. Nearly word-for-word.” Raoul turned to Fousette. “I convinced her to tell it a second time after asking if I could record her telling it. It took some coaxing, but she agreed. You’ve watched that bit of footage, I believe.”

“Yes, several times. It will be a feature in the documentary. I’d love to capture it from other wild cousins from elsewhere to back it up, though I know that might be impossible. So, was that it for your visit with them that first time?”

“No. They asked for my help with Pinecone, but weren’t sure how exactly to ask...”

FOUR

“Elder Curious stare Biggen viewer long time.”

Raoul nodded. “Yes, Pinecone. I’m going through my list of wild cousin rehabbers.” He paused a moment realizing he may need to explain what that was. “That is Biggens who heal injured wild cousins or act like a dame or sire to wild cousin pups whose dame or sire has been killed by predators.” It felt strange at first to be able to answer her in Common while she spoke in chitterspeak.

Pinecone nodded. “I understand. Why you do this?”

Raoul chuckled. “Maybe I can find you a possible mate. One raised by Biggens won’t be so afraid of Biggens. I’m guessing that is one of the reasons Jessophat invited me to meet you but didn’t dare raise the subject. Some Biggens embarrassed by such talk.”

Pinecone’s eyes shot so wide he could see she had blue irises. “You find Pinecone mate? You so kind, Elder Curious.” She hugged him.

“I can’t make any promises that I will succeed, Pinecone. And if I find a rehabber with a male squirrel in their care, you may need to come with me to meet him at the rehabber’s home. That won’t be easy. You’ll have to travel in a cage as most Biggens don’t understand or are ready to learn that wild cousin squirrels are as smart as Biggens. It would also be safer for you.”

Pinecone wigwagged her tail nervously. “I be brave if Elder Curious find me mate.”

“I have a question for you, Pinecone?”

“Ask.”

“You have taken Biggen name, Pinecone,” Raoul stated and repeated her name in chitterspeak. “What names do you call Jessophat, his mate and their pup in chitterspeak?”

“They no have chitterspeak names.”

“Have you asked them if they’d like names you could speak?”

“Elder Curious wise. Pinecone no think that. I will ask.”

Raoul turned back to his search as Pinecone darted off to talk to the others.

“Jessophat and his family let Pinecone choose names for them in chitterspeak. Jessophat’s name is Kind. Carulin’s name is Sunshine, and Sanial’s name is Energy. It hadn’t occurred to them either to come-up with names she could pronounce as they didn’t need it very often as they understood who she was talking about by description of male Biggen, Biggen mate, and pup. I then made another suggestion to Pinecone. If she was good at understanding ‘Biggenspeak’, why not learn written ‘Biggenspeak.’ She hadn’t heard of that concept, so I showed her the beginnings of the basics on my flatpanel. She was fascinated. I suggested that she turn to Sanial for help.

“That was partially because I really needed her to leave me alone while I spoke to the various rehabbers. I also thought if she was as smart as she seemed to be, she’d catch on. Anyway, it took me several days to go through the list of rehabbers. I was down to one of the last ones on my contact list when I found one rehabbing a young male squirrel. Fortunately, we didn’t need to travel to the rehabber. He came to us as he wanted to inspect the potential territory before considering releasing his ward into it. That was a plus in his favor as it showed he deeply cared about those he rehabbed.

“He was impressed with the territory and Jessophat’s family. His main concern had been that the male he had raised had grown a little too attached to him. He feared that Twig as he called the squirrel wouldn’t be able to adjust to living in the wild, despite his best efforts to prepare him. He was still hesitant as he didn’t want Twig to simply become a pet to Jessophat’s family. He didn’t mince words and stated this flat out. Jessophat simply nodded and chittered out the doorway. That was Pinecone’s signal to drop in and introduced herself. He wasn’t as surprised as we expected and he understood chitterspeak, though he could not speak it well. He seemed to relax a bit as he turned to me and simply stated, ‘So that’s why you specifically were looking for a male wild cousin, Dr. Kayobble.’”

“Two days later, he returned with Twig in a cage. The poor thing was frightened, cowering in the back of the cage. Jessophat and his family looked in on him and tried to reassure him in chitterspeak that they would not harm him. He was welcome to share their territory. Pinecone arrived and they backed off. Pinecone and Twig hit it off right away after sniffing each other through the cage bars. She opened the cage, entered and they sniffed some more. She then led him out, chittering encouragement to him. They scurried up a tree and were quickly out-of-sight.”

“The following day, I packed my things and headed out. Jessophat and his family thanked me for my help. They decided they would keep their distance from the wild cousin squirrels and let them sort it out for themselves. I was back on the trail when I heard some chattering overhead. Pinecone dropped down onto a low branch just above my eye level...”

“Elder Curious leave?”

“Yes, Pinecone. I’ve done what I can. How is Twig adjusting to his new home?”

“He scared or he come down thank Elder Curious. He like pup. Pinecone teach him. He learn.” She came the rest of the way down on the trail and offered a hug. “Thank you. You say you no wise elder. You are wise elder. You help Pinecone many ways.”

“As I said, that was about year before your arrival, Ambassador. I’m anxious to see how things have changed. I’ve contacted Jessophat, to get permission to come visit. He agreed.” Raoul ended his tale as the fasten harness belts sign lit indicating they would be landing soon.

FIVE

Their hovercraft came to a halt and settled onto the forest floor next to the butternut tree Jessophat’s family lived in. Jessophat was there ready to greet his guests.

“Raoul, welcome back.” He pulled the raccoon into an embrace before turning to Aldin and bowing. “It is an honor to have you visit our humble home, Ambassador.”

Raoul introduced Fousette who shook hands with Jessophat. He did his best to not stare at Jessophat’s claw-like fingernails.

“I’ll gladly help you move your gear into our guest quarters.” Jessophat pointed to a ladder with his tail. “I’ve already deployed our ladder anticipating you and Fousette will find it useful.”

Excited chittering echoed through the canopy as a small gray blur raced down the trunk and leapt at Raoul, nearly knocking him over as he was embraced in a hug. After disentangling, the small gray squirrel pulled a small flatpanel off its back, typed furiously on it. then the blind reader vocalized the message in Common. “I’m so happy to see you Elder Curious. As you can hear, I learn how to read/write Biggenspeak. Biggen flatpanel speak it for me.” Pinecone smiled proud at her accomplishment wigwagging her tail in a flourish as she looked up at Raoul. Only then did she notice Fousette and Aldin. She squeaked in startlement and looked towards the tree ready to bolt.

“Pinecone, these are my friends. They will not harm you.” Raoul pointed first to Fousette, “Fousette makes educational films.” The woodchuck bowed to the wild cousin squirrel.

“I’m delighted to meet you, Pinecone. ‘Elder Curious’ has told me a lot about you. I understand if you need to sniff me.”

Pinecone cautiously approached him and sniffed and then backed off. She typed into her flatpanel again and the reader stated, “Thank you, Woodchuck Foo-set.”

Raoul then pointed to Aldin, “and this is Aldin Busheytail the Younger, Ambassador for the Nah-mah-kant-ah Free Squirrels of the planet Terra.”

Pinecone’s eyes shot wide briefly and then she hid her face in her tail. “I no worthy meet such Elder,” she mumbled in chitterspeak.

Aldin chittered reassuringly at the wild cousin squirrel, which got her to slightly lower her tail and look at him. He addressed her in chitterspeak. “First name mean Friend. Friend no Elder, Pinecone. I alone here. No way contact my Elders. Biggens need names for everything.”

Pinecone nodded. “Yes, Biggens name all things. I watch you on Biggen viewer.” She pointed to her flatpanel with her tail. “Friend brave. Biggen martin hunt Friend. Friend fight Biggen martin. Friend defeat Biggen martin. Friend spare Biggen martin, no kill.”

“No, I no kill Biggen martin. My people rule, you kill, you eat. I no want eat Biggen martin. Too big. Biggen martin and Friend now friends.”

Pinecone’s eyes shot wide again.

Aldin switched to Common/Biggenspeak. “I had tricked him into attacking me to prove to other Biggens that I am not a dumb animal. Going back to Biggens having names for everything. As you know Biggen have more words than chitterspeak. I just go by Aldin/Friend unless I’m performing my job as Ambassador. Ambassador means I am the representative for my people.”

“Voice of Elders?” she inquired in chitterspeak.

Aldin paused a moment. “Yes, that is a good description. I speak on behalf of my Elders.” He drooped his tail. “It’s hard to do so as I have no way to contact them.”

Pinecone drooped her tail and typed quickly on her flatpanel. Again, the blind reader spoke her message. “Pinecone knows what like be alone. So sorry for All-den.”

Raoul looked about in the tree canopy. “I’m afraid to ask this, Pinecone.”

“What Elder Curious fear?” Pinecone responded in chitterspeak.

“Did you and Twig become mates or did he flee like the other before?”

Pinecone gigglechittered and typed quickly on her flatpanel. “Twig is good mate. We raise two litters of strong pups. Pups all in own territories now to sunrise outside of Biggen territory. Twig

isn't here because he's afraid of Biggen strangers. He is not afraid of our Biggen neighbors, Kind, Sunshine, and their pup, Energy. It confuses him like it did me at first how Biggen pups take so long to grow." Pinecone smiled and typed some more. "As I told Elder Curious last time, I helped him learn. But he still fears how I learn hear and read Biggenspeak and make flatpanel speak Biggenspeak for me. He hear/understand some Biggenspeak."

"Perhaps your mate would be less afraid if he meets me first, Pinecone," Aldin suggested. "It's not like I can help the 'Biggens' much in moving their things into the guest room. As for me, all I've got is my own flatpanel." He tapped it with his tail where it rested on his back attached to his fur.

"That's a great idea," Raoul replied, "provided Pinecone thinks it would help. She knows her mate best, of course."

Pinecone thought about it a moment. She slung her flatpanel onto her back, where it stuck to her fur as it was designed to do. "Come," she squeaked to Aldin and darted up the tree. He followed.

SIX

(CHATTER!) "Intruder! My territory! LEAVE!" The male squirrel called out as it charged at Aldin.

Aldin held his ground as he had flashbacks from his recent visit with Butternut's adopted grandpup. Pinecone got between him and her mate. The male stopped short. He looked at Aldin and then Pinecone in confusion.

"Why Pinecone no chase off intruder?"

Pinecone moved over to her mate and groomed him a little, letting him do likewise as he sniffed her. His eyes widened as he pulled back.

"I smell Biggen raccoon."

Pinecone nodded. "Yes, Biggen raccoon, Elder Curious, visit Biggen squirrel Kind, mate, and pup. I greet elder like Biggens greet." She pantomimed a hug.

Twig nervously chattered. "Danger trust Biggens." He looked past her to Aldin. "Who you?"

"Biggen name, Friend. If you sniff you understand. You no bite, I no bite."

Aldin remained calm as Twig sniffed him. His eyes shot wide again as he did so. He quickly retreated next to his mate. "Smell like squirrel and different." He paused a moment. "Smell like Biggen and squirrel both."

"That is what I am. I squirrel and Biggen both. Small Biggen?" Aldin shrugged. "I Biggenspeak." He switched to Common/'Biggen'. "Pinecone say you hear some Biggen. I call myself a small Biggen squirrel. My people can Biggenspeak." He switched back to chitterspeak. "My people like Biggens here." He pointed to his throat with his tail.

Twig chattered nervously.

Aldin drooped his tail. "Friend sorry Twig fear him. I no mean scare you."

"Small Biggen, Friend, strange. Smell squirrel and Biggen both. Biggenspeak but look, move like squirrel. Where small Biggen squirrel territory?"

Aldin drooped his tail again and replied in chitterspeak. "I no know where my people territory. I lost. Is hard explain. I answer as can in chitterspeak though Biggenspeak have more words. I guess. Biggens guess. Guess is all I can speak. Do you ever look at pinpricks in night sky?"

Twig flicked his tail up and down once indicating affirmative. "I look if wake in night. No leave drey or nest. Danger leave at night. Many night predators."

Aldin nodded, paused at the strange look Twig gave him and then flicked his tail up and down once. "Do you know what pinpricks are?"

"Biggens say they like sun but far, far away."

"This no my world. I guess my squirrels' territory on different world near one of those far suns. Why I think that? Pinpricks make pattern. I show on Biggen viewer." Aldin pulled his flatpanel off his back and called-up the night sky. He traced the frying pan constellation. "See? These pinpricks look like Biggen food holder. My home night pinpricks different." He called-up the pattern and pointed out the Big Dipper where the local frying pan should be with an extra star in the handle. "This why I think my home is no here but near one far suns."

Twig chattered nervously.

"On my world I in burrow doing Biggen learn thing. My people use burrows hide from our Biggens" Aldin pointed down with his tail. "Hole open under me. I fall. No fall in ground. Strange, I fall in sky. No tree close. I confused how I got in sky. I scream scarred. Hit ground hard, break front leg. Hit ground hard sleep. Sleep long time. I wake in Biggen squirrel nest. Biggen see me fall and help me. Was hard speak to Biggen. Biggenspeak different my home. I speak my home Biggenspeak, show different." Aldin gave the same sentence in chitterspeak, Common, and finally in English. "I love butternuts."

"Friend home Biggenspeak strange. No sound like Kind Biggenspeak."

“Biggen squirrel take me to healer. Bind leg. Leg heal. I learn hear/speak this world Biggenspeak. Biggens welcome me. I live with Biggens. This world new home. I no know how contact my people.” Aldin drooped his tail and switched to Common/Biggen. “Pinecone said you understand some Biggenspeak. Biggenspeak has more. If I knew where my world was and could contact my people, I’d tell them how nice this world is. Many would come here. It would be hard to explain and take a long time as to why. Our Biggens not so nice as yours. Your warning to no trust Biggens fits our Biggens. We hide from most of our Biggens.”

Aldin pointed to himself with his tail and shrugged. “I don’t know how else to describe my people. We live like squirrels but in colony something like a Biggen town. We care for the forest. We can Biggenspeak. We use Biggen tools we find useful. That’s why I say I’m both a squirrel and Biggen. So, small Biggen?” He raised his tail briefly in a Terra English question mark-like curve and shrugged his shoulders like a Biggen would.

Pinecone pulled her flatpanel off her back and called-up the video of Aldin’s encounter with Enhray in the Parliament chamber the previous year. Twig’s eyes shot wide again as Pinecone pointed to Aldin in the video and then to Aldin there in front of them. She froze a frame on the flatpanel and zoomed in, showing her mate the notch in Aldin’s tail and the same notch in the tail in the squirrel in front of them.

Twig chattered nervously again. “Small Biggen squirrel fight Biggen martin. Defeat martin. I remember. I watch with mate at Kind’s nest.”

“Friend, brave small Biggen,” Pinecone added.

“Martin and Friend now friends, as I say before to you Pinecone,” Aldin answered.

“Why brave small Biggen here?” Twig asked.

“Biggen raccoon, Curious and Friend friends. Curious ask me come. Visit you, mate, and Biggen squirrels.”

“Why come?”

Aldin shrugged. “You need ask Curious why, Twig. I guess and is only guess.” He switched to Biggenspeak again. “I think Curious wants to see how much Biggenspeak Pinecone has learned. And maybe to see how you are doing, Twig. Curious did arrange for you to meet Pinecone.”

“When small pup, Dame warn me no trust Biggens or become like pup forever. She right. I like big pup when Biggen healer bring me here. I very scared. Biggen squirrels scared me. Then Pinecone come. Free me from Biggen trap. She lead me away into forest and help me grow.”

“All thanks to Curious,” Aldin pointed out. “Will you come and meet him?”

Twig hesitated in answering as he nervously wigwagged his tail.

“You don’t need to decide now, Twig. But think about it. I should get back before they start to worry. You live near Biggens, you understand how they can worry about the smallest thing.”

Twig flicked his tail up and down once.

“Tell Curious I come later,” Pinecone added.

Aldin’s flatpanel beeped and he drooped his tail sighchittering. “I told you Biggens worry.” He pulled it off his back and answered the call. “Hello ‘Curious’.”

“Our hosts will be serving dinner soon.”

“I was on my way back.”

“Good. Will Pinecone and Twig join us?”

“You can ask them. They’re right here.” Aldin turned his back to the two squirrels so they could see Raoul and he could see them.

Raoul switched to chitterspeak. “Pinecone and Twig come to Kind’s nest, eat? Kind share butternuts.”

Pinecone glanced at her mate. Twig hesitated a moment and then nodded. “I go for butternuts,” he said.

SEVEN

It took a lot of coaxing on Pinecone’s part to help Twig to work through his fear with the Biggen strangers present. He eventually fought through his fears as he knew there were butternuts. Neither the Biggen woodchuck with the name he couldn’t say nor the Biggen raccoon, Curious, made any sudden moves. They held still while he sniffed them. They then settled in a circle around the Biggen-made platform to eat. There were butternuts for them and other cooked food for the Biggens. ‘Cooked’ was Biggenspeak word for it. He knew no word for it in chitterspeak. Twig wrinkled his nose at the strange smell of it. Having the platform between them and the Biggens helped him be brave enough to sit with the stranger Biggens. The Biggens used tools to lift the cooked food to their mouths to eat. Twig always found it strange. Small Biggen, Friend, ate butternuts like them instead of the Biggen cooked food. Friend said he loved butternuts. Well, so didn’t Twig, which is why he worked up the courage to come into the Biggen squirrel nest with the strange Biggens there. There were more butternuts than they could eat. Kind was always so generous when they come to see him, his mate and their pup who was many, many seasons older than him. It was one of the reasons he feared coming. It was just like his dame had warned him when he was a pup. Trust Biggens be like pup forever. If they ate with Biggens all the time,

they would never need to look for food or save food for the long winter. They would become just like pups relying on the Biggens for food! Biggens always had more than enough food. He understood the Biggens didn't mean to do that to them. It was just their way to share food with friends. Biggen raccoon, Curious, and Biggen woodchuck must have really liked their cooked food. Neither they nor their hosts talked as they ate. After the Biggens ate all that was in front of them, Twig was slightly startled as the Biggen raccoon, Curious, leaned back from the table and patted his tummy with a paw.

"You feed us too well and too much, Jessophat and Carulin."

"I'll echo that," the Biggen woodchuck added. "I fear if you feed us like that at every meal, I may not be able to climb the ladder in just a few days."

Twig didn't understand all the Biggenspeak but caught enough of it to understand the Biggens enjoyed the cooked food and ate too much of it. Kind and Sunshine were always so generous with food.

"Thank you," Sunshine/Carulin replied. "We only cook like that for guests and on special occasions." She looked over at Friend. "What could be more special than having the Ambassador visit us."

Friend twitched his tail. "I'm just a 'smart' cousin squirrel given a special title because Parliament didn't know what else to do with me. So, they gave me a title and appointed me the special representative of my people, whom I have no way to contact."

Twig did his best to hide his surprise. Friend no say he Voice to Biggen Elders. He understood that Biggen word, 'parliament' meant Biggen Elder council. He watched them with Pinecone on the Biggen viewer when Friend first went before them and fought the Biggen martin who tried to hunt/kill him. He had forgotten they choose him as Voice for his people. At least that is how Pinecone explained that was what Biggen word 'Embassador' meant.

Curious chuckled as he looked over at Friend. "Well you've done your best to fill the part."

Sunshine/Carulin glanced at Twig, Pinecone, and Friend. "Do any of you need more butternuts?"

"You two are very generous hosts," Friend responded. "I wish I could eat more, as I love butternuts. There isn't anything like them I ever had back on Terra. Sadly, I can't eat any more. Like Fousette, if I eat like that every day, soon, I'll have a hard time to climb as my stomach would get in the way."

Twig drooped his tail briefly. Friend's people no have butternuts! Butternuts were the best. How could they not have butternuts?

Pinecone quickly typed on her flatpanel and it spoke. "Kind and Sunshine so generous. In fall it would take Twig and I two days to gather and eat that many butternuts. I am..." she hesitated a

moment. “stuffed. I think that the Biggen word. No eat no more room here.” She patted her tummy.

Twig wigwagged his tail nervously as he eyed the two visiting Biggens. This was the part he always dreaded. Biggens will want to talk and talk and talk. “Like mate, I no eat no more. Kind and Sunshine generous. You no like other Biggens my dame warn me. Thank you.” The last word combination seemed strange to him in chitterspeak. His mate had taught it to him. Was Biggen term said when given gift like butternuts they shared. It pleased the Biggens when he said it.

“I hear warning before,” Curious chittered, which surprised Twig. “What your dame warn you of us Biggens, Twig?”

Twig hesitated a moment. “Is no nice. Kind, mate, and pup different. No know if you different. Dame warn littermates and me when small pups no trust Biggens. Danger. Trust Biggens become like pups forever. Biggens come from those disobey Elders, refuse forget old Biggen ways. Is why Elders chase off in old story.”

“My dame said same,” Pinecone added in chitterspeak rather than type her response in her flatpanel. “Kind, Sunshine, and Energy different, like big squirrels no Biggens. Curious different. Curious kind Biggen Elder raccoon. Curious help me. Curious speak to Biggen healer. Healer agree bring you here, Twig.” She snuggled up to him and nibbled an ear affectionately.

“Pinecone, I Biggen raccoon. I no Elder. Biggens different.”

“You tell me you see over three tens winters.” She held up all ten claws three times. “Makes you Elder.”

Curious sighed. “Biggens different, Pinecone. We speak this my last visit. Biggens live long time. We can see six tens winters. I no Elder.”

Twig was surprised. He knew Kind and Sunshine see close to three tens winters and Energy see ten. He never knew how long Biggens live. Was long, long time. He nuzzled his mate back in affection for nibbling on his ear and then added. “I was like pup forever with Biggen healer. No blame healer. He help me. Healer no squirrel sire, no squirrel dame. No know how teach me be no pup squirrel. Pinecone teach me.” He waved his tail about. “I always scared come here. I come with mate. I always scared. Biggens always have food. Lots of food. Always generous. We come here, always have food. Come here, no need find food. Easy choose be pup forever. I know Kind, Sunshine, and Energy no mean to make us pups forever.” Twig drooped his tail. “No know how explain. Biggens different from squirrels. Kind, mate and pup like big squirrels. Still Biggens.” Twig turned his head towards the entrance “We need leave soon. Sun go down soon. No safe night climb. Many night predators. I hear one very dangerous one two nights past.” Twig did his best to make a hooting noise. He was worried about the night predator bird coming around. It also made a good excuse to leave before the Biggens make him talk and talk well past time to sleep.

Friend wigwagged his tail nervously and used Biggenspeak. “You have those here?” He paused a moment and sighed. “Well, I don’t know the Biggen word for it if it is like what we have on Terra. On Terra we have a night predator bird who sounds like that. In our Biggenspeak, we call it,” Friend gave the English word for owl. “In our chitterspeak,” Friend gave the chitterspeak word for owl.

Twig never hear chitterspeak word before. Was easier than night predator bird. He would try his best to remember it.

Friend continued in chitterspeak. “Predator bird big or bigger than Curious. Hunt on fly. Make no sound when fly. Drop down from up, surprise, strike fast. You no know it there until after it hunt catch you. Big foot claws.” Friend held his front paws apart the distance he was trying to describe. His tail began to wigwag faster like he had spotted a predator.

Now Twig’s tail wigwagged fearfully at the description of the large predator.

“Hold squirrel one foot. Eat/swallow squirrel whole. No always kill before eat/swallow. Ours hunt sunset through night to sunrise.” Friend shuddered as his tail continued to wigwag rapidly as he now glanced toward the entrance.

Kind called up an image of a new Earth owl on his flat panel. The image looked like a great horned owl on Terra. “One of these?”

Friend’s tailwigwagging increased to almost a blur as he did his best to not call out a warning chitter. “Yes,” he responded in Biggenspeak. “You have them. On Terra they hunt smaller rodents more than squirrels. But we still fear them for good reason.”

Twig saw this as proof that Friend was more like squirrel like them rather than a Biggen, even if he could Biggenspeak without tool. He just as scared of the owl/night predator bird as him. He was right to be scared. Unlike ground predators, owl could snap you off a tree branch.

“In Biggen, we call this,” Kindgave the Biggenspeak/Common word for owl. “And if there is one in the area, that’s concerning. I have never seen one in the forest, only pictures,” he pointed to the image on the flat panel. “It says here they can stand taller than Curios like you said, Aldin. Some have a wingspan as wide as two mits.” He turned to Twig and Pinecone. “That’s a little longer than this table. For your safety, you should go home now.”

“I’ll accompany them to help keep them safe,” Sunshine volunteered, and escorted Pinecone and Twig out into the forest.

Twig was happy to get away from the Biggen nest, even if Sunshine followed them. He understood she meant well in her Biggen way.

After Carulin and the two wild cousin squirrels departed, Jessophat turned to his other guests. “This is a bigger problem then I said to our neighbors. Owls are a protected species. I can’t just look for it and trap or kill it. I’ll need to contact some experts to trap and relocate it. I can’t have that sort of predator here that can not only kill my neighbors but potentially harm or kill Saniel. If it’s on the larger side, it could even harm Carulin or me.”

Aldin’s tail was still nervously wigwagging. “I think I’ll be joining you two in the guest room tonight.”

“I don’t blame you, Ambassador,” Raoul responded.

“I had planned to head out at sunrise to go take care of the business I have while here in the Forest and Lakes District. I guess I’ll be leaving a bit later for my own safety.”

“Take the hovercraft. It’s not like we’ll need it for a few days, and I can summon another one if you don’t return before we need one.”

“Thank you, Raoul.”

EIGHT

“And that’s the basics for Terran-style pizza. Bake at 4...um. Sorry, I was about to give you the Terran temperature.” Aldin paused for a moment making a quick calculation in his head. “Bake at 200 for 30 to 35 ceklicks.” Aldin slipped the one he made demonstrating the process into the commercial oven. His tail wigwagged a moment. “It might cook a little faster in this type of oven. We’ll need to keep an eye on it.”

Aldin’s student was a male tassel-eared citizen squirrel with tawny brown mixed in with salt pepper gray fur. He finished-up his own pizza creation and slipped it into the large oven next to Aldin’s. “I can’t thank you enough, Ambassador.”

“You’re welcome, Jochen, and I hope it takes off for you. If it does, you need to thank your cousin, Aouphril. She’s the one who persuaded me to meet with you and discuss this partnership.”

“Well, I had attempted to make pizza on my own based on her description of the ones you’ve done for her and Orlan. While it more or less worked, I knew it wasn’t right. I now know what I was doing wrong.”

“And the choice in toppings could be near endless.” The scent of cooking pizza filled the restaurant kitchen. “There’s one thing I have a hard time with though.”

“What’s that Ambassador?”

“Terran tomatoes are red.”

“Seriously? They’re not purple?”

“They taste the same, but, yes, different color. If there were others from Terra here, they might be confused by the strange color.”

“So, what are your proposed terms?”

Aldin tapped an icon on his flatpanel sending a legal document onto Jochen’s. “I’ve retained Mustelid Law Firm in Forestdale, Alisferil as my legal counsel. I recommend you have your legal counsel read through this before you sign. In brief summary, I receive one percent in royalty fees. I understand that your margins in the restaurant business aren’t very large to begin with and it’s not like I’m doing the work.”

“That’s very generous of you, Ambassador. Most franchises charge ten times that.”

Aldin shrugged. “I’m a smart cousin squirrel who can just as easily live off the land as live in a home like other citizens. I have little need for credits beyond the travelling I do when not on Ambassador business, like this meeting with you. So, I don’t need to be greedy in partnerships like this.”

“I will take your recommendation and have my counsel review before I sign.”

The timer chimed and they pulled their pizzas out of the oven. They let them cool a bit before cutting them into triangular pieces and digging in. Jochen’s face lit-up in pure delight. “This is incredible,” he mumbled between mouthfuls. “Aouphril wasn’t exaggerating in her description.”

Aldin nibbled on his and simply nodded back at the larger squirrel. “She and Orlan are opening their location near Nadowahoc College in Northeastern Hills Region in in about 2 weeks. Unlike you, she didn’t already have a restaurant to start with.”

“I suspect they’ll do well with hungry college students.” Jochen managed between bites of pizza. “Thank you, again, Ambassador. I think this will be a hit addition to our menu.”

A klick later, Aldin standing in front of a door, reached-up on tippy toes, and pressed the buzzer. A bobcat answered, looked about and then down. Aldin did his best to suppress the fear that welled-up inside him at the sight of the large female predator. Instead, he bowed.

“Hello, Representative Larel. As promised, I have stopped by while in the area.”

“Ambassador? Please come in. Today’s afternoon video session will be starting in just 25 ceklicks. You might be needed.”

Aldin raised an eyebrow but followed the bobcat into her home as asked. She led him into an office space with a large flatpanel on the wall. Small images of various representatives could be seen in some small square sections of the panel. Other squares were black. A purple x over a purple microphone in the corner indicated they were muted.

“Do you know why I may be needed?”

Larel sighed. “It’s not my place to say. But your arrival here will save us some time.”

Aldin nodded, looked at the camera and waved. Several of the representatives, including Dr. Butternut Gowandle, Raoul’s wife, waved back.

The time went by quickly as more and more of the black squares disappeared and were replaced with the faces of representatives. Their name and region appeared in tiny print in their little screen squares. The session was called to order by a lemur, the appointed Chancellor for the session. When the Chancellor or anyone spoke, their muzzle filled the right-half of the screen.

“Wonderful, I see that Ambassador Aldin is with Representative Larel,” the lemur said. “That saves us time in needing to summon you.”

“Yes, Chancellor, I am here with Larel, Representative of the Lakes and Forest District. I just arrived about 25 ceklicks ago. She said that I might be needed. How may I be of service?”

“A side argument occurred this morning between the Representatives of Northeast Hills Region and Cussock Mountains Region over whether or not wild cousin squirrels are sentient.”

“Before you go any further, Chancellor, I must provide full disclosure. Parliament needs to know that Dr. Butternut Gowandle, Representative of the Northeast Hills Region, saved my life this past spring by providing me a blood transfusion. Since that time, she has been trying to win my heart to join her and her spouse as a third member of their marriage. She has been doing so as by the tradition of her people, we are mates as we’ve shared blood. That’s not the tradition of my people. I’m aware she lived among wild cousin squirrels for six years. She is probably as knowledgeable, possibly more so, than her spouse as to the nature of your wild cousin squirrels.”

The lemur nodded. “So, noted. Despite that, what is your feeling on wild cousin squirrels?”

“The interactions I’ve had with them to date have not been interactions with dumb, wild animals, Chancellor. They are intelligent. One tried to choose me as her mate this past winter. They call you ‘Biggens’ in their language. I think it’s big ones mashed together. Once the college graduate students with me intervened and we got that female to understand I’m a ‘small Biggen,’” Aldin made quote marks with his claws, “she told us she claimed the territory we found her in after she fled south for several days after her brother was killed by a predator. Squirrel chitterspeak isn’t as,” Aldin hesitated for a moment trying to come-up with the right word, “robust a language as Common. However, what she said was more than one would expect from a dumb animal. You may recall that during the previous Parliament I took the oath of citizenship and declared my

species as ‘smart cousin squirrel.’ I went with that as I’m not citizen squirrel-size. I’m the size of a wild cousin. However, unlike your wild cousins, I learned to speak Common and have the vocal cords to speak it. Your wild cousins can’t speak Common as they don’t seem to have the vocal cords for it.

“Representative Gowandle’s spouse is currently working on a documentary that will show that your wild cousin squirrels are intelligent and self-aware. They are not just dumb animals.” Aldin could see many of the representatives on screen were mumbling to themselves. As they were muted, he could not hear what they were saying. “But don’t take my word for it. Why don’t you try and ask them yourselves.”

A wolf raised his hand and was recognized by the Chancellor. The wolf’s muzzle replaced the Chancellor’s, much as Aldin’s appeared on others’ screens when he was talking. “I am Carles, Representative of the Acadian Valley Region. Ambassador, how do you propose we ask this of wild cousin squirrels? If you’re lucky enough to see one, it flees as soon as it spots you.”

“Do you blame them, Representative Carles? All of you are bigger and you could be out to hunt them. That’s in the general sense of you. I’m not accusing you in particular of hunting them, Representative Carles. I recently met one who may be willing to come and answer questions on video. It may take a few days to convince her to come. However, I think she’ll do so.”

“We can summon her,” Carles responded.

Aldin twitched his tail as he replied. “You can try, Representative, but she may choose to ignore it. She is not a citizen and isn’t obligated to respond to your summons. And unless you’ve already decided she’s sentient, why would you attempt to summon a ‘dumb animal’ that is still hunted in some Regions?” Aldin looked about to try and indicate he’d be looking all about the chamber if this were a face-to-face session. “You do realize, that will need to stop if she convinces you she’s sentient like everyone in this Parliament. It would be immoral to continue hunting a fellow intelligent creature.”

Multiple hands rose across the screen. The Chancellor seemed to stare for a moment. “I’ve received multiple requests to move to a face-to-face session to discuss this further. Parliament will reconvene in the Parliament Chamber in the Capital Region in four days. Do your best to bring the wild cousin before Parliament, Ambassador.” The lemur ended the session and the flat panel went dark.

Aldin drooped his tail as he looked up again at the giant (to him) bobcat. “Thank you for sharing your space with me, Larel. I need to go try and do as the Chancellor has requested.”

“Do you think this wild cousin squirrel you speak of will come?”

“It would have been easier to convince her to attend through video. An in-person session with a large group of what she’ll view as large predators may not be so easy to make happen. That may be more to ask for than she can handle.”

NINE

The hovercraft slowed to a stop and settled on the forest floor. The door opened and Aldin leapt out and bounded over to the home of Jessophat. Raoul and Fousette met him in the doorway to the guest quarters.

“We need to talk,” the raccoon stated to the small squirrel.

“Yes, we do, Raoul. Apparently, your wife had an argument in Parliament this morning.”

“I see you’re aware of that. She sent me a video message midday briefing me on the situation. Parliament has summoned you.”

“I’ve already attended today’s afternoon session. They’re moving to a face-to-face session in four days and would like Pinecone present if she’s willing to do so. If she were a citizen, they would summon her. I am to do everything I can to persuade her to attend. If she attends and convinces them she’s not a dumb animal, then the world will finally see that wild cousin squirrels are sentient. However, that also will mess with your documentary plans.” Aldin turned to the woodchuck. “I’m not purposely ignoring you, Fousette, as this also involves your work with Dr. Kaynobble.”

“It does, but it may make things easier. Instead of needing to prove to the world they’re sentient, which could be viewed as controversial, we can concentrate more on their day-to-day lives, especially Pinecone. Her trip to Parliament could be its own episode.”

“A lot of this may be moot if she isn’t willing to go. So, it should be obvious where I’m off to next.”

Aldin darted up the tree before either could reply. He made his way through the forest to the territory claimed by Pinecone and Twig. As he arrived at the edge, he chattered out a greeting loudly. “Hello! Small Biggen, Friend, come.”

Twig quickly appeared through the tree branches and blocked his way chattering a warning. “Small Biggen, leave.” His tail lashed back and forth.

Aldin sighed while wigwagging his tail responding in chitterspeak. “Twig, I no threat to you. Where Pinecone?”

“I coming, Friend,” she called out from a couple trees over. She made her way over to the same branch. She and Twig groomed each other briefly. She then turned to Aldin. “Curios say you leave this morning, no come back for days.”

Aldin drooped his tail. “Plans changed. Biggen elders summon Pinecone. Pinecone may ignore Biggen summon as you no Biggen. Biggen rules no apply. If you say no, I go and tell elders you say no.”

Twig wigwagged his tail furiously. “NO! Biggen elders want speak, Biggen elders come here.” He stomped a footpaw on the branch. “No safe go to Biggens.”

“Why Biggen elders want speak?”

“Curious mate Biggen elder. She at elder council. Curious speak about his mate to you?”

Both wild cousin squirrels wigwagged their tails in the negative.

“She once Biggen squirrel like Sunshine. Her name Butternut.”

“Curious mate Biggen squirrel?” Twig asked. “Raccoon and squirrel can no make pups. Biggens strange choose mate can no make pups.”

Aldin nodded and wigwagged his tail in the affirmative switching between chitterspeak and Common as needed to explain. “Yes, Biggens sometimes strange. Butternut have accident. I no know details. Accident change Butternut. She get small like you, me. She now small Biggen.”

Both Pinenut’s and Twig’s eyes got wide for a moment in disbelief.

“Is good they can no make pups,” Twig concluded. “Biggen pups too big. They make pups, Butternut might die.”

Aldin shuddered as that hadn’t run through his mind. “After accident, Butternut live among squirrels in forest near she and Curios territory. She live with squirrels six years,” Aldin held-up 6 claws. “She act like dame to orphan pups, pups who dame and sire die. She return to Biggens and become elder. She argue-fight with another Biggen elder about squirrels. Now Biggen elders want ask squirrels questions. They tell me this. I tell them I know a squirrel who might talk to them but might not.” He looked at Pinecone. “Again, I no force you. Think about Biggen elder request to talk. If you agree, we leave tomorrow. Is long journey to elder meeting place.”

Twig repeated his earlier protest, “No safe go Biggens.”

Pinecone chattered reassuringly to her mate. “I will think about it, Friend. I come to Kind’s nest tomorrow sunrise and tell you what I think.”

“Thank you,” Aldin stated in Common and darted back towards Jessophat’s home.

Twig wrapped his tail around her in affection and stared into her eyes and pleaded. “Pinecone no leave. I very scared. No trust Biggens. No like Kind, mate, and pup. Is dangerous. Biggens trap Pinecone. No let Pinecone come back.” He shed tears. “I lose Pinecone.”

Pinecone wrapped her tail around her mate. "I say I no decide now. Decide sunrise. If I go, Friend with me. You saw when Biggen martin try hunt Friend. Friend keep me safe."

The following morning, Pinecone with Twig following came to Jessophat's home. He offered them food as the family sat to have breakfast with their guests. After they ate, Pinecone turned to Aldin. She used chitterspeak rather than her flatpanel.

"I have questions, Friend. How we go to Biggen elder meet place?"

Aldin responded in chitterspeak, "We take Biggen flyer to Biggen place with bigger flyer. Take bigger flyer to Biggen elder meeting place. Must share bigger Biggen flyer. Biggen bobcat elder fly with us." Pinecone's and Twig's tails wigwagged nervously as he continued. "Bobcat no hunt us. Is forbidden. She try hunt us, Biggens put her in cage like martin try hunt me. Stay trapped in cage full season. Have food/water, but no can leave trap. I meet bobcat elder yesterday. Stay with her for elder meeting over Biggen viewer. She no try hunt me during meeting. She no try hunt you. Is only way to go to Biggen elder meeting."

"If Biggens meet on Biggen viewer, why Biggens now meet muzzle-to-muzzle?"

Aldin switched to Common. "Biggen have more words. Biggens have too many questions about squirrels. The program that runs the flatpanel couldn't handle so many Biggens trying to ask questions all at once. Biggen elders decide to switch to muzzle-to-muzzle meeting."

Twig chattered a warning. Pinecone groomed him in reassurance. "I will go. I trust Friend. I be safe."

"No."

"You can come, too, Twig," Aldin stated trying to reassure him. "I can protect you both. You will be safe."

Twig's tail lashed about. "No! I no trust strange Biggens! I no stop mate she choose go. I stay. I guard our territory. You," he pointed to Aldin with his tail, "small Biggen Friend, protect Pinecone. Bring her back safe! You fail, I bite hard!" He fled back into the forest.

Tears welled in Pinecone's eyes.

Aldin switched to Common. "If you want to go talk to your mate before we leave, Pinecone, we can delay leaving a klick, about distance sun travel one paw width when held outward," he demonstrated.

She wigwagged her tail in the negative. "I understand Biggen time measure. We go now. I go find Twig I no come back."

Aldin turned to the others. “Raoul, Foussette, you came here to interview and video Pinecone. As she’s leaving with me, what are your plans?”

“I shall return with you to the flitterport,” Raoul answered, “and book a flight home.”

“I plan to stay here a bit longer as I want to interview Jessophat and his family some more. I’ve also got drones out in the forest that have been videoing Pinecone and Twig as Pinecone permitted. I have colleagues who will cover Parliament’s session.”

Aldin nodded. “How long you need to pack, Raoul?”

“All done, my stuff is in the hovercraft already. It’s why I was a little late to breakfast.

Aldin turned again to Pinecone. “Last chance. You can still go talk to Twig and try to convince him to come.”

“We go,” Pinecone responded while making sure her flatpanel was securely attached to the fur on her back.

TEN

At the flitterport, Pinecone kept close to Aldin and Raoul. There were Biggens everywhere, both prey and predator. She saw none of the Biggen predators made any threatening moves towards Biggen prey. They talked together in friendly ways. If a Biggen predator or prey moved towards their group, Aldin bounded over to quietly talk to them and shake paws. They’d look past him at her and back at him, nodding and backing off giving her and Raoul space. She was still very, very scared, leaving wet pawprints as they went. It was so hard to not flee up a wall and cry-out a warning. It was only because Raoul and Aldin were there and showed no fear that she could barely keep in control. She thought that if Twig had come along, he would have been up a wall as soon as they saw another Biggen. If that had happened, he’d have cried-out and she would have been quickly up a wall with him too scared to move. They would have had to travel in a cage to feel safe. She didn’t want to travel in a cage. She wanted the Biggens to see she wasn’t scared of them, though deep down, she was very scared.

“Now for what will be the hardest thing for you, Pinecone. We leave Raoul here and get on the big Biggen flyer, called a flitter. Raoul will be taking a different one as Parliament meets in a different territory from his home. Biggen elder bobcat, Larel, will meet us on the flitter. It will be just the three of us and the flitter crew. As an elder, Larel made those arrangements to try and make it easier for you. She’ll keep as far as she can from you on the flight unless you choose to approach her. She understands you will be scared of her.”

Pinecone hugged Raoul and then followed Aldin down a tunnel into the flitter. She could smell the bobcat in the tunnel. She must have already gone down the tunnel to this flitter thing. She

chittered nervously, but proceeded to follow Aldin down the tunnel. She could also smell otter and beaver. That must be the 'flight crew' Aldin talked about.

They arrived at an opening and a Biggen beaver stood there and greeted them. "Welcome aboard, Ambassador and special guest, Pinecone. I am Dauvid and will be your steward on this flight." The beaver scooted down on all four paws to try and make himself look smaller. "I understand if you need to sniff me, m'am."

"Dauvid's job is to make sure we are comfortable. If we need food or water, ask and he'll bring it to us."

Pinecone nodded and sniffed Dauvid trying to assure herself he was no threat to her as Aldin had tried to teach her on the hovercraft flight to the flitterport. When she finished, she pulled the flatpanel off her back and quickly typed into it. It spoke for her. "Thank you, Daw-vid." She slung it back on her back as the beaver stood back up and smiled.

"This way. As soon as you're buckled up, we'll take off." Dauvid lead them to Biggen pup-size seats with a window view. He demonstrated to them how the safety harness worked. He pointed to the purple lights overhead in front of each seat. "When the light is on you need to get into your harness."

Pinecone wigwagged her tail nervously. Aldin squeezed her forepaw gentle. "We only must be 'trapped' as the flitter takes off and prepares to land." He looked about and turned again to Dauvid. "Where is Representative Larel?"

"She chose to be in the other room to give our special guest space."

"Thank you."

The beaver nodded and went to his own seat, buckled in and sent a message to the cockpit that the passengers were ready. As he did this, Pinecone followed Aldin's lead and buckled in. She was scared, but saw that Aldin wasn't, so, it must be safe. She felt everything around her lurch a little as the flitter's engines started to spin-up.

A female voice came over the speaker, "Good morning! This is Charlos. I am your pilot for this flight. Welcome aboard. We should have clear weather on this six-klick flight to the capital district. As soon as we reach cruising height, I'll turn off the harness signs and you can move about the cabin as you wish. I am honored to serve as your pilot today. Here we go."

The flitter's engines started to whine loudly and then the noise seemed to quiet down. Aldin pointed out the window next to them as the ground fell away. Pinecone stared in wonder at how quickly they rose into the sky.

"We fly higher than predator birds!" she chittered in wonder as she stared out the window.

"And faster too," Aldin responded as the flitter broke through the cloud deck and leveled off.

The harness signs turned off. Aldin unbuckled his restraints and Pinecone did likewise. She turned in her seat and put both forepaws on the window edge and stared out the window in fascination. Any fear she had before about getting on the flitter were gone.

Dauvid approached from an angle that ensured she'd see him. He kept back a way waiting for her to look towards him. He bowed slightly. "This will be a long flight, m'am. When you grow hungry or thirsty let me know. Otherwise, I will leave you alone."

"Thank you," she chittered and Aldin translated. Dauvid did a quick head nod again and headed aft to the other cabin.

"If you think you'll be alright alone for a little while, I'm going to go talk to Larel for a moment."

Pinecone nervously wigwagged her tail briefly glancing at him and chittered, "She no hunt you?"

Aldin gigglechittered responding in chitterspeak, "Bobcat elder no hunt me. Is forbidden and we friends."

She nodded still staring out the window. "I meet elder bobcat later."

He switched back to Common. "Are you sure you want to do that, Pinecone?"

Pinecone turned back to him away from the window, giving him her full attention, pulling her flatpanel off her back, typing away as the blind reader repeated her written words. "I must meet Representative Larel, All-din. I must try and put what you taught me in the hovercraft to practice. I need to become like a small Biggen to handle being in the Parliament chamber surrounded by Biggen predators. I must learn to fight down the urge to flee if I am to speak to the Biggen elders. How can I do that if I don't try? Is better I try first with Larel. If I can't face her alone, how will I face a room full of Biggen predators?"

Aldin nodded. "You are already very brave, Pinecone, to come this far. I'll let Larel know you wish to meet her. When you're ready we can either go back to her cabin or she can come out here."

Pinecone thanked him and turned back to the window and stared down at the clouds and the land far below. *What am I getting myself into?* she wondered to herself. Part of her wished Twig had come.

"You're leaving pawprints, Ms. Pinecone. Are you sure you wish to get any closer?"

Pinecone froze for a moment staring at the Biggen bobcat. The predator was large enough that she could swallow her in a single gulp if she leapt at her just then. She did her best to push off the thought and fear as she chattered and Aldin translated word for word. “As I say to Friend, I must try, Elder Bobcat. If no do this, I can no face Elders in elder meeting place.”

Aldin then added, “She can’t pause to pull her flatpanel around and use it to talk, Larel. Basically, she means, As I said to Aldin, I must try, Representative Larel. If I can’t face you alone, how can I face all of Parliament in the chamber?”

Pinecone nodded and moved a little closer while her tail stood straight up her back, occasionally wigwagging on its own. She fought down the urge to chatter a warning. Her mind kept screaming at her to flee while she still could. But Aldin stood his ground and didn’t respond to her warning chatter. If he wasn’t afraid, it must be safe, right? She forced herself to inch closer.

Larel slowly scooted down to make herself look smaller as Aldin had instructed her earlier. “You don’t need to force yourself all the way on this first try, Ms. Pinecone. We still have 4 clicks until we land. It would be terrible if the fear you must be feeling caused your heart to burst. Are you really sure you want to push yourself this hard? I can smell your fear.”

The bobcat’s tone was full of worry, not what she expected to hear from a predator. Pinecone moved up within touching distance of Larel. She pulled her flatpanel off her back and typed rapidly on it and it read her words for her. “Yes, we have 4 more clicks. But I need to do this. May I sniff you, Elder Lawr-el?”

“Yes,” the bobcat replied and held still as the small squirrel did so, her tail whipping about behind her rapidly.

Larel’s scent was similar to a normal bobcat, but also different. Biggins always seemed to smell slightly different from their normal-size cousins. Much to her surprise, she didn’t smell any blood, unlike a normal predator. No matter how much a predator cleaned itself, there was always a lingering scent of blood from their recent kills. Was what Aldin said earlier true? Biggen predators didn’t hunt Biggen prey? Or she hadn’t hunted recently.

Pinecone typed again. “May we hug?”

“If you feel up to it, yes.” Larel slowly sat-up and held her arms out. Pinecone set her flatpanel aside and accepted the embrace, hugging back gently. Larel could feel the tiny squirrel’s heart racing. She released the squirrel.

Pinecone scooped her flatpanel up and typed again, slinging it onto her back before it could finish reading her words. “Thank you. I need to be alone awhile.” She fled back into the other cabin but held down the urge to cry warning until the door closed behind her. Larel heard it through the closed door.

Larel looked to Aldin. “You’re not reacting to her warning cries, Ambassador.”

Aldin partially pulled an earbud out of one ear. “Something I learned some time ago. I now use these when I interact with cousin squirrels. They’re programmed to noise cancel warning screees. Otherwise, I would have instinctually fled due to her warning cries adding my own to hers. She did better than I expected on her first try. Thank you for your willingness to assist.”

“The pleasure is mine. I never thought wild cousins were sentient before the argument in Parliament. Pinecone obviously is. Nor did I ever believe I’d get to hug a wild cousin squirrel. My late father would be upset with me for ‘letting dinner’ go.” Larel shuddered. “He taught me to hunt as a survival skill. I hated it. The thought of taking another’s life sickens me, Ambassador. I remember when former Chancellor Mara opened up to you about her experience learning to hunt.”

“You know about that?”

“Yes, that encounter was not private. She shared it with all of Parliament. As those emergency sessions were aired live on all channels for all citizens to watch, I saw it. Her sharing of the trauma she experienced helped me and I’m sure many others who experienced the same feelings. It is also why I never viewed you as a wild cousin squirrel. Those sessions when you first arrived proved to me you aren’t from our world as you have said. But I know of some who still don’t believe.”

ELEVEN

Dauvid kept his distance from Pinecone as she perched herself on top of one of the seatbacks in the cabin as far from the rear cabin door as she could get. She quietly screeed a warning of predator while staring out one of the windows and also keeping an eye on the cabin door. Instinct told her to climb. She couldn’t climb any higher inside the Biggen flyer and they were higher in the sky than any tree. After a while, Aldin came back into the front cabin. She saw Larel behind him briefly before the door closed. She let out another warning scree. Much to her surprise, Aldin didn’t react to it. The fact he remained calm helped her to get over the fear and settle down, moving back down into the seat proper.

“Dauvid, I think it’s time we have a little food and water, say either some fruit or nuts.”

“Yes, Ambassador. Give me a couple ceklicks and I’ll have it right up for both of you.” Dauvid made his way to the aft cabin to see if Larel needed anything.

Aldin turned to Pinecone. “You did better than I expect on your first try. Representative Larel is willing to talk by flatpanel if you want to talk for a while. Later, if you want to have another round of facing her, she’s willing to do so again.”

Pinecone typed on her flatpanel. “That was so hard, Al-den. How do you handle it so well? And you didn’t flee with me as I warning screeed.”

“I have had lots of practice in the past year or so, Pinecone. If you hadn’t been concentrating so hard, you would have noticed I left light pawprints. Larel may be a friend, but my instincts, like yours, were screaming ‘Predator! Flee!’ all along. It can be difficult. As to how I did not react to your warning screeches, as I told Larel,” he partially pulled one of the earbuds out. “Biggens have lots of neat tools. These block me from hearing those screeches.”

Dauvid arrived with water and what looked something like Terran cherries, except they were bright yellow.

“Cherries!” Pinecone exclaimed in chitterspeak. She typed in her flatpanel. “Thank you, Dawvid. I love cherries!”

“The pleasure is mine, ma’m. Enjoy.” He bowed and pushed a cart towards the aft cabin.

“Cherries?” Aldin responded in chitterspeak. He sniffed one and nibbled. His eyes grew wide. “They are cherries.”

They both nibbled for a while. Pinecone gigglechattered before typing. “Al-den no have cherries before?”

Aldin listened carefully to the Common word and repeated it a couple times to better remember it before responding. “No, I didn’t know if they existed here or what they were called. We had them back on Terra, but ours were red and tart.” He puckered his mouth a bit on the last part. “But still good. These are sweeter.”

“There is only one cherry tree near my territory. Kind and family enjoy them. I get a few, but they rot too quick. Twig loves them too.” She drooped her tail as she typed that last part. “I wish he came along but understand why he refused.” She sighed and then typed some more. “We’ll eat and rest a little while. Then, I’ll talk to Larel over the flatpanel. After that, I will face her again. Before you ask, as I said before I must keep trying. If I can’t fight down the fear facing her alone, I won’t be able to face the other Elders unless I am in a cage. I don’t want to be in a cage.”

Aldin nodded and nibbled another cherry.

Once she had calmed down, Pinecone did talk to Larel via flatpanel briefly, before working up the courage to go see her muzzle-to-muzzle again. Pinecone insisted on doing so without Aldin. She sat a little distance from Larel. The bobcat talked about how her father had taught her to hunt when she was half-grown. She explained how she hunted a wild cousin rabbit and it had sickened her to take its life to please her father. She carefully didn’t go into detail of how she killed and then ate the rabbit. She did say she never hunted again after that. There were tears in her eyes as she finished as she looked at the wild cousin squirrel. “I know I scare you, Ms. Pinecone, but I would never harm you. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I did.”

Pinecone offered to hug her again and tried to comfort the large predator as she cried into the little squirrel's shoulder. Pinecone gently scratched the Biggen predator on the back of the neck as she cried into her shoulder trying to give her reassuring chitters as she had done in the past for her pups when they were upset. After a while they released each other's grip and pulled back. Pinecone typed into her flatpanel for it to read for her. "You call me brave, Elder Larel. You are just as brave to share such a terrible memory with me." Her tail wigwagged wildly behind her. "Thank you for sharing it with me. But I need to be alone again for a while."

Larel nodded as she wiped the last of the tears out of her eyes as the wild cousin squirrel again fled to the front cabin. For the briefest moment, Larel felt the urge to give chase as she had done to that rabbit so long before. Fresh tears burst forth and she buried her face in her forepaws.

Pinecone would meet Larel two more times on the flight. In that final meeting, she was able to tolerate being close to her like she was Raoul. Her tail still betrayed she was scared, but she did not flee and barely left wet pawprints on the floor. Aldin praised her on her progress.

The fasten harness signs lit as the pilot's voice came from the speakers. "This is your pilot, Charlos, we are just 15 ceklicks out from our landing point. Please strap in."

Pinecone moved to a child-size seat near Larel and proceeded to buckle-up. She reached over with her tiny forepaws and squeezed one of the bobcat's in reassurance as she looked up eye-to-eye with her. Larel raised one eyelid briefly before buckling-up herself. Aldin glanced over at Pinecone as he got into the seat next to her and proceeded to buckle-up. Pinecone typed into her flatpanel. "Another test of myself, Al-den and Elder Larel. We will see how I handle being near you for the rest of the flight. I know I am safe here and you will not hunt me, though my instincts are still telling me to flee. I'm going to watch out the window for the rest of our trip down." She tucked the flatpanel away on her back and looked out the window as the flitter started to drop through the clouds. She was still amazed at how high up and fast the Biggen flyer flew.

TWELVE

Pinecone hugged Dauvid in thanks. She did likewise for the giant biggin otter pilot who came back to meet the passengers after their landing. Charlos was delighted to meet the wild cousin squirrel. Likewise, for having piloted for Aldin and Representative Larel. The bobcat walked up the tunnel leading from the flitter to the flitterport and the two squirrels bounded close behind her. As they emerged, a voice familiar to Aldin called out.

"Aldin, over here!"

Aldin looked in the direction of the voice to see Butternut waving. Aldin led Pinecone over to her. Larel followed. Butternut's tail began to wigwag nervously.

Larel kept back a little and bowed. “Hello, Representative Butternut. I had a hard time believing what you claimed over the video sessions. It is hard to tell how big or small an individual is in front of a camera. Now with my own eyes, I see it’s true. You are a cousin squirrel.”

Butternut’s tail continued to wigwag nervously. “I’ve told the tale in Parliament, Representative Larel, as unbelievable as it may be to some. I’m not looking forward to our face-to-face session. I know I’m going to have a hard time keeping the fear down.” She looked towards Pinecone who seemed to be as calm as Aldin near the large bobcat. “However, our special visitor seems to be able to handle being near you better than me. Pinecone must be a better student of Aldin’s than I’ve been.”

Pinecone slid the flatpanel off her back and typed quickly. “Aldin is a good teacher, Representative Butternut. I had little choice as I was in a flitter for 6 klicks with Representative Larel. She can tell you how scared I was the first few meetings on the flight.” She looked towards the bobcat. “Thank you again, Representative Larel, for helping me. I’ll see you in a few days when Parliament meets.”

Larel bowed and headed off through the flitterport. Pinecone again looked towards Butternut and gazed at her reddish-brown mixed with peppery gray fur and her tasseled ears. She typed in her flatpanel and it read her words. “You look different from squirrels my forest, Elder Butternut. Different fur color. Extra fur like pine tassels in your ears. I like it.” She then added in chitter, “Curious say you, he mates.”

Butternut nodded. “Yes, Raoul/Curious and I are mates, Pinecone.”

“But you no can make pups.”

Butternut drooped her tail. “No, we no can make pups.” She responded in chitterspeak before switching to Common. “But we have loved each other dearly, even before my accident. Sometimes, you choose your mate for that rather than to start a family.”

Pinecone typed into her panel. “I’m sorry, Butternut. I didn’t mean to hurt you. Curious is good friend. I’m just surprised he mate to a squirrel. He must love you dearly. I can see why. I think your fur color and your ears make you...” Pinecone hesitated a moment trying to think of the Biggen term, “attractive? Pretty? I don’t know if that is the right word.”

“Yes, that is close enough. Thank you for the complement.”

Pinecone drooped her tail as she typed more. “You must miss him being here. I miss my mate. He doesn’t trust Biggens. He wouldn’t come along.”

“He put me in charge of protecting her, Butternut. He threatened to bite me hard if I don’t bring her back safe after this meeting.”

Butternut arched an eyebrow. “Having lived among wild cousins for several years before you brought me back to Raoul, Aldin, that’s a very serious threat. He’s entrusted you with keeping his mate safe or he’ll neuter you.”

Aldin’s eyes briefly shot wide enough to show the whites before he shuddered at the thought. He turned to Pinecone. “Why didn’t you explain what he meant to me, Pinecone? I’d have never let you meet alone with Larel as you insisted. As much as I know she was no threat, I didn’t realize how serious a threat your mate had made to me.”

Pinecone shrugged like a Biggen would before typing. “You look and smell like other squirrels. You can chitterspeak like other squirrels. You eat like we do. You told me what it’s like in your colony. It’s not much different, really. So, I assumed you would understand what he meant when he threatened to bite you hard.” She paused a moment and yawned. “I’ll need sleep soon.”

“You’ll be staying with me,” Butternut stated. “Come it’s not far from here once we get to a hovercraft.”

Someone gently nudged him. Then someone else also did so from his other side. Aldin slowly stirred awake as the other two squirrels gigglechattered. They nudged him again simultaneously.

“Morning, sleepyhead,” Butternut chided him.

Pinecone gigglechattered from his other side as she gently nudged him a third time. “Friend sleep late. Sunrise long ago.

Aldin uncurled and yawned and blinked a few times. “Sorry, Flitter-lag. Always hits me like that.” He looked again at Pinecone. “You didn’t oversleep, too?”

“Some, no like Friend. I wake, go eat, and speak Elder Butternut. Why you no speak you Butternut mate?”

Aldin sighed. “My people are different, Pinecone. Butternut saved my life by giving me some of her blood. I know that is the rule among your people. To my people that doesn’t make us mates. We are only mates if we ‘try make pups’.” He glanced from Pinenut to Butternut and back to Pinenut. “Butternut already has a mate. I will not get in between her and Raoul/Curious. They are good friends to me. After saving my life, I wouldn’t be much of a friend if I ruined that between them.” He then gave his full attention to Butternut. “I know you keep trying to attract me and bring me in as a second mate, Butternut. I’m not ready for that commitment. I’ve watched Raoul’s body language. He may not admit it to you because he loves you enough to let you have your way, even if it hurts him. I really think he is afraid he’ll lose you to me if I join the two of you. I don’t think he’s anymore ready for a three-way marriage than I am. You and Raoul will always be close to me.”

Butternut drooped her tail briefly and simply nodded. “As Pinecone agrees, by the custom of cousin squirrels, we are mates, though I know it’s not the way of your people. Please forgive me if I keep trying to win you over your way, Aldin.” She hugged him briefly and he returned the embrace. She quickly changed subjects. “Come, we saved you some breakfast. Then we can show our guest around the area as we have a few days before Parliament is in session again.”

Pinecone hesitated a moment rather than follow Butternut. She turned to Aldin. “I...”

Aldin shushed her. “You live with Biggens who are more like big squirrels as you say. Butternut and I look like squirrels. Still part Biggens. Mating can be a touchy subject among Biggens. It can be like how Twig feels about Biggens. You don’t need to apologize. You just didn’t know.”

She hugged him in thanks and bounded after Butternut. Aldin followed behind into the other room. He chose not to admit he enjoyed having the two of them snuggled with him overnight. He hadn’t experienced that since he had arrived on this new Earth. He had forgotten how safe and reassuring it felt to share a nest with other squirrels. It was the most restful he had felt in the year plus he’d been in this new world. At the same time, it made him nervous. Would it be that easy for Butternut to win him over? Just keep inviting him into bed with her. Would Raoul accept that? Perhaps with Butternut snuggled down between the two of them? Things to ponder later. Right now, he was hungry.

THIRTEEN

The lemur chancellor hammered the session of Parliament to order as Aldin took his seat in his designated spot as did the various representatives did throughout the chamber. The lemur pointed to Larel to step forward. “Larel, Representative of the Central Lakes and Forest District, has the floor.”

Larel came down to the designated spot to address the chamber. “My fellow representatives. This live session has been called to discuss whether or not wild cousin squirrels are sentient. To that end, Ambassador Aldin indicated he knew of a wild cousin who might be willing to meet with us and invited them to attend this session. She agreed. I had the pleasure of meeting her on the flitter flight from my district. As the territory she claims as her home is in my district, though she is not a citizen, that still makes her someone I represent in this session. As such, she and the Ambassador agreed to let me introduce her to you. Ms. Pinecone.”

The doors to the chamber opened and Pinecone nervously bounded in and headed down towards the chamber floor, leaving wet footprints as she scampered along. There were some upset murmuring from some sections of those assembled. Larel glared about the chamber. They quieted down without the chancellor needing to gavel them quiet.

“I have already come to the conclusion that Pinecone is sentient like you and I. I’ll leave it up to your judgement as we talk to her and she to us. She does not have vocal cords like us and relies on a flat panel to speak to us in our language. I spent six click on a flitter flight with her and we

spoke for some time. I know I wasn't being tricked. I was actually speaking with her." She looked about again. "I also won't stand by and let this become a repeat of the session when the Ambassador first came upon us. Should any of you object to her coming before us **AFTER** we had asked her to come, you'll need to get through me first." She looked towards the lemur. "I fully understand that if I fight here in the Parliament chamber, I'll spend three months in jail. I'm willing to serve that time to ensure the safety of our visitor." She glared out at the others present. "Do any of you who object care to share a jail cell with me?" She paused as no one moved and then looked to the lemur. "Thank you, Chancellor. I surrender the floor to our visitor as I see she is now in the visitor's circle." Larel went over to Pinecone and hugged her briefly, whispering in the small squirrel's ear, "You've got this." The bobcat then made her way to her designated seat cushion near the front of the chamber.

"Visitor Pinecone, a wild cousin squirrel, you are recognized as having the floor."

Pinecone nodded to the lemur, pulled the flatpanel off her back and typed as it read her words to the chamber. "Thank you, Chann-sill-lor. Greetings Biggen elders as my people would call you."

There were more hushed murmurs of disbelief in the audience. Pinecone ignored the interruption as she continued. "I know some of you will doubt it is me typing away and maybe someone else is trying to play a trick on you. As such, I ask that a couple of squirrel representatives who understand chitterspeak step forward to translate for me. I will address you for a while in my own language to put your doubts aside. I ask that neither Ambassador Aldin nor Representative Butternut be among the volunteers as they are very familiar with me." While two representative squirrels made their way to the floor, she continued. "To speak Biggen to you, I need to use one of your flatpanel devices. As representative Larel speak, I don't have the vocal cords needed to speak Biggenspeak directly to you. Before I go too far, that is what my people call you larger animals, Biggens, much as you call us wild cousins. Your language we simple call Biggen or Biggenspeak. I believe Ambassador Aldin calls it Common. Common has more words than chitterspeak. When I use chitterspeak, it may not be quite right. Please forgive me of that in advance. That said, I'll put the flatpanel away for a short while."

She tucked the panel onto her back and turned to the two Biggen squirrels who had volunteered. "You chitterspeak good?"

Both affirmativeflicked in response. "Yes," they added in Common.

She nodded "Good. You names?"

"Swifttail, Representative of Low Island Forest District."

"Roundear, Representative of High Lakes District."

She chattered a warning at them. "You no translate just now."

Both drooped their tails and apologized before translating what she had asked of them and her scolding of them.

“Good. Thank you Elder Swifttail and Roundear. You Biggen names translate in chitterspeak. Many Biggen names no translate.” She listened to their translation. “I hear Biggen. Is important you speak in Biggen exactly what I say in chitterspeak. You no speak Biggen right I will know. Other Biggen Elders need hear chitterspeak have less words.”

She nodded again in satisfaction to their translation into Biggen. She then spoke slowly to allow her two translators time to repeat her words in Biggen. She gave the Parliament a brief overview about her growing up. How she met Jessophat and his family. She paused at the confusion both her translators had at the names of Kind, Sunshine, and Energy. She pulled her flatpanel off her back a moment to give their Biggen/Common names.

“Is why I was happy you names translate. Their names no translate.”

She continued for close to a klick leading up to her flutter flight and coming before the elders in their meeting place as asked. She thanked both Swifttail and Roundear and indicated they could go sit down. She pulled the flatpanel off her back again.

“I’m willing to start over in Biggen and better expand on my life story if you wish.” She looked at the lemur. “However, I am going to need a break, Head Elder. I’ve been fighting the urge to flee since stepping in here. There are so many of you and my mind is screaming at me to flee from all the predators though Ambassador Aldin has reassured me that you will not hunt me here. May I please leave for a little while?”

The lemur smiled at her. “I think we can all use a brief break. We shall reassemble in 50 ceklicks.” The lemur pounded his gavel once.

Pinecone swiftly ran to the door and out of the Parliament building. She scaled the nearest tree, crying out warning scree. She was soon joined by Butternut who seemed as scared as she was. The two of them spent nearly half the allotted time giving the occasional warning scree as they clung tightly to their tree branches.

FOURTEEN

Both Pinecone and Butternut had calmed down by the time Parliament resumed. Pinecone took her place in the visitor’s circle and pulled the flatpanel off her back and typed. “Have I satisfied your doubts as to whether I’m smart like you and not a dumb animal? Do you wish for me to start over in Biggen? Or do you wish for me to only speak of certain things in more detail in Biggen?” She paused looking about.

Larel raised her hand and was recognized. She stood up. “Ms. Pinecone, I have no doubts about you being sentient like us. I do have a question. Why did the other squirrels chase you away after you established your territory near Jessophat and his family?”

“I couldn’t explain that as well in chitterspeak,” Pinecone typed. “In Biggen, I was banished.” Pinecone drooped her tail. “Though, I had no idea I would be punished in that way. It was only after that when I approached Jessophat and his mate and their son and became friends with them. I had little choice. I could freeze to death or I could take a chance trusting Biggens.”

“Why were you banished for something you didn’t understand at the time?”

“That will take some time to explain. It would be better if I first tell you a story. And it would be best if I tell it in chitterspeak. If Swifttail and Roundear are willing to come back down to translate. This story has been told for countless generations among squirrels. Dames telling their pups the tale.”

She tucked the flatpanel away as Swifttail and Roundear joined her on the floor. She spoke in chitterspeak, again slowly, to allow Swifttail and Roundear time to translate for her. She nodded to them from time to time.

“I speak story dame speak when I pup. Her dame speak her when she pup. Her dame dame speak her dame and back.” She paused. “Long, long time ago. I no know how long ago. Different Biggens then. No like you Biggens now. Strange Biggens have no fur, stand and walk on back legs. Big as bears. Biggens predators. Biggens prey on all other animals,” she paused, “and on each other.” Her tail whipped back and forth nervously. “Biggens smart, know many things. Biggens trap squirrels and make squirrels smart. Smart squirrels escape from Biggens, fear Biggens eat them. Smart squirrels flee deep in forest far from strange Biggens. Smart squirrels hide from Biggens.

“Biggens think they wise. Biggens no wise. Think they top predator. Think they control all. Biggens make big fire. Fire real top predator. Biggens no control fire. Fire grow and grow, burn and burn. Fire burn and eat around whole world. Fire eat all Biggens. Most animals, prey, predators, birds all die. Fire kill, eat all. Burn and eat all trees and plants.

“Smart squirrels know Biggen will make mistake. Smart squirrels prepared for Biggen mistake. They fill burrows full of food, nuts and seeds. Fire come, they no know how stop fire. Many panic, flee from fire. Fire catch, burn, and eat them. No all flee. Those no flee hide in burrows like woodchucks. Other animals also hide in burrows. Other animals no hunt squirrels in burrows. After fire eat all on surface, have no more to eat, fire starve and die.

“Then animals who hide in burrows come out. Animals who hide in burrows with smart squirrels no hunt squirrels many, many seasons. Smart squirrels replant forest. Smart squirrel elders fear squirrels make mistake like old Biggens and fire come back. Elders command smart squirrels forget Biggen ways. Must forget so fire never come back. Most obey. That is why squirrels no like Biggens now. Some smart squirrels no obey elders. They chased away from forest. In time they grow big and turn into, you, our Biggens. They grow lonely, trap animals make smart like them. They also grow big and turn into Biggens. I warn you like you my pups. Biggens no obey elders we must no trust Biggens. You trust Biggens you forget how live like squirrel. Then you

depend on Biggens to live or you die. You become like pup forever.” Pinecone chattered a warning. “Story ends.”

She turned again to Swifttail and Roundear and thanked them before pulling the flatpanel off her back and began typing again. “Believe or not as you wish about my people’s origin tale. If there is any truth to it, your ancestors and mine are the same except yours were banished for disobeying the elders, while mine obeyed and have tried to forget how to be smart and instead live like other ‘dumb’ animals in the forest.” She drooped her tail as she continued to type, “And now I have been banished as I said before telling you that tale. Banished because I chose to settle in territory claimed by Biggen squirrel Jessopha/Kind and his family. And once banished, I had no choice but to trust Jessopha/Kind and his family. It was risk becoming a pup forever or freeze to death. Fortunately, they did not treat me like a pup. By the time spring arrived, we had become so close to one another that if I was a Biggen or they were normal squirrels, we’d have become mates.”

There was a little grumbling among some assembled by that last statement, which Pinecone ignored as she continued. “But Jessopha, Carulin, and I understood that could not be as it is forbidden among your people. They remain as close to me as if we were siblings. But my fate was sealed. Just as in the warning we give to our pups, as I’ve now trusted Biggens, I have come to rely on you more and more.” She held up her flatpanel briefly. “Without this I could not speak Biggen to you as I don’t have the vocal cords you have that allow you to speak Biggen.

“If it weren’t for the help of Representative Butternut’s mate, Dr. Raoul Kaynobble, who’s chosen chitterspeak name is Curious, I wouldn’t have a mate. He contacted a wildlife rehabber who was raising an orphan squirrel, he called Twig. Poor Twig was so traumatized when he arrived. I was more like his dame..mother to him for the first few months. Eventually, he chose to stay with me and we’ve raised two litters of healthy, strong pups. Strangely, as they’ve left to establish their own territories, they haven’t been chased off like I was. I’m thankful for that.”

Tears welled in her eyes. She looked about the chamber, trying to wipe them in between typing away on her flatpanel. “And as in the warning to our pups in our limited chitterspeak, I have begun to forget how to live like a squirrel. Here I am standing before a chamber filled with Biggens, many of you predator species, and I am not as scared as I would have been just a few days ago, partially thanks to Ambassador Aldin/Friend’s teachings. I consider Representative Larel a friend, though she is a Biggen bobcat who could easily eat me in a single bite or two.” She shuddered and then glanced towards Larel. “I mean no offense, friend Larel.

“Twig, if you are watching this at Kind’s nest, I’m so sorry.” The tears began to pour forth from her eyes as she repeated that line in Chitterspeak before continuing. “I didn’t fully understand why you didn’t want me to come here before the Biggen Elders. Chitterspeak is so limited. You were simply trying to protect me from myself.” She again repeated those two lines in broken Chitterspeak between sobs as she set her flatpanel onto the floor, before curling up into a ball next to it, and started bawling.

“We shall take another fifty ceklick break,” the Chancellor announced.

Butternut quickly made her way to the floor and gently nudged Pinecone and spoke in chitterspeak, “I live with squirrels six years, Pinecone. I raise many pups who lost dame and sire. I like dame to them. I can be like dame to you. Come, cry on shoulder. You safe. I protect.”

Pinecone looked up at her with tear-filled eyes, sat-up and accepted Butternut’s embrace and bawled into her shoulder. Butternut rocked them back and forth slowly, chittering quietly into Pinecone’s ear in reassuring tones. Butternut wrapped her tail around Pinecone protectively as a dame would do to their pup when comforting them. Though the Chancellor declared a break, no other representative moved from their seat watching the two cousin squirrels on the chamber floor.

FIFTEEN

Pinecone cried herself out before Parliament resumed. Upon being recognized again by the Chancellor, she again asked those assembled if they had further questions of her. None were asked, so she surrendered the visitor’s circle and sat down where she was told to do so near Aldin. He briefly squeezed one of her forepaws reassuringly and whispered to her how brave she was.

“The Representative of the Cussock Mountains Region is recognized.”

A fox dressed in a business suit made his way to the floor. He bowed to the Chancellor, “Thank you, Chancellor.” He bowed towards Pinecone and smiled, “and thank you to our visitor, Pinecone.” He then looked out into the chamber and made eye contact with Butternut. “And I must express my apologies to the Representative of the Northeastern Hills Region for doubting your claims.”

Butternut responded, “Your apology is accepted, Representative Talnoir.”

Talnoir nodded again. “My fellow Representatives. Pinecone is but one wild cousin squirrel. For all we know she was trained to say these things to us.” Pinecone bristled where she sat. Aldin again squeezed her forepaw reassuringly. “As she stated herself, she has known Representative Butternut’s husband for several years. In addition, by our own rules and proceedings, when possible, we need to obtain statements and facts from at least three sources. While it is obvious that Ms. Pinecone is sentient, that may not apply to all wild cousin squirrels. I propose we bring forward a few more to question.”

Several representatives raised their hands. The chancellor pointed to Carles, the wolf representing the Acadian Valley Region. He stood in place and asked, “Representative Talnoir, just how do you propose we do that? We were fortunate, that Ambassador Aldin knew of Pinecone and was able to convince her to come before us.”

Talnoir bowed again. “An excellent question, Representative Carles. I have been pondering it myself since Pinecone first spoke. The easy route would be to reach out to various wild cousin

rehabbers and see if any have wild cousin squirrels in their care that could be brought forward to us to question. I've pushed that idea aside because there is the potential that the rehabbers have already influenced those wild cousin squirrels. I think we will have to capture some to bring before us."

The chamber erupted in protests and counterprotests before Talnoir could continue. The Chancellor hammered his gavel trying to bring things under control. A high-pitched whistle pierced through the chamber causing many to grab onto their ears and all to quiet down. The Chancellor and Talnoir were among those who grabbed onto their ears briefly.

Aldin looked towards the Chancellor. "My apologies, Chancellor and Representative Talnoir, for interrupting." He then looked about the chamber. "I can be louder if needed." He sat back down next to Pinecone.

Talnoir continued as if he hadn't been interrupted. "If those we bring forward talk to us and tell a similar origin tale to that which Pinecone spoke, I'll accept that all wild cousin squirrels are sentient as we are. It would show that Pinecone isn't unique. I surrender the floor."

More hands shot-up, but there wasn't the disruptions that had occurred previously. Many spoke for and against the proposal. Two clicks went by as nearly all had their say. Once all spoke who wished to, Aldin raised his forepaw and was recognized. "Other than to whistle you back under control, I have stayed out of your discussion on this issue up to this point as I am not a Representative. However, I still feel I need to speak on this as an observer watching and listening to you. Have you listened to each other and thought through what you are proposing? How would you react, if it was your spouse or child that was kidnapped and taken someplace you don't know? Or maybe if it was you being dragged away from your loved ones? That's what you're proposing to do. If you follow through with this proposal, it will cause great trauma to those you propose to capture and bring here. Some may be injured or killed in the process. Surely, there must be a better way." He turned to the Chancellor. "Thank you, Chancellor. I yield the floor."

Before debate could erupt anew from Aldin's warning, Pinecone immediately stepped forward into the Visitor's Circle. All fell silent. She rapidly typed on her flatpanel and the blind reader spoke what she typed as she shed tears. "Biggen Elders...Biggen Representatives, I plead with you. Please don't do this. Try asking first. If you do not wish to speak to squirrels being cared for by your healers...your ree-hah-bill-e-tat-ors, then send out Biggen squirrels who chitterspeak well into the forests you know my kind live in. Have them call out asking to speak to an Elder. Our Elders are not like you. They are not chosen at random to serve for two seasons and then go back to their normal lives. As explained to me by my dame..mother, an Elder is a squirrel who has survived many seasons. As they have survived, they are viewed as being wise with much knowledge. Others turn to them to settle disputes. They may flee just as any other squirrel, but maybe they'll respond to a request to speak, Elder to Elder. Please don't go trap my kind just because I told you our origin story as it was told to me by my mother and her mother before her. I came here because you asked. If I had known it would lead to this, I would have listened my mate's warnings not to come and stayed in my territory. If you follow through with this, it will

only prove why we always warn our pups to ‘No trust Biggens!’” Her tail wigwagged back and forth in distress. “I yield the floor.” She bounded back next to Aldin.

Pinecone’s proposal triggered a new round of debate that went into the late afternoon. The vote was barely in favor of trying to find wild cousin squirrel Elders and ask them. How to do so was quickly resolved by Butternut who directed them to her husband who could recruit current and past students to assist, many of whom were back in their home regions and districts. It was agreed upon. Parliament would reconvene as soon as contact was either successfully made or all asked to help tried and failed.

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 lift 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.

SEVENTEEN

A hedgehog was on a large flatpanel in the Parliament chamber. “This is Dr. Territan, Hofstrah Medical University, Northeast Hills Region. My patient is stable and should eventually recover. He is currently sedated. I had to pull half his upper molars on the right side. One was broken, but the infection had spread to the ones next to it. Fortunately, it hadn’t spread to his jaw or I would have had to euthanize him. I have him on antibiotics and had to file down his incisors. He’s a bit malnourished and dehydrated. We’re pumping nutrients into him. If Giguere had arrived a day or two later, my patient would have been dead. We’ll implant new false molars after he’s had a chance to recover a bit”

“Thank you for your report, Dr. Territan,” the Chancellor stated. “How soon before we may talk to him?”

The hedgehog shook his head in the negative. “I can’t give you an estimate on when he’ll be up to any kind of interview. He’s sedated for his own safety. It could be a week, or it could be a month.”

The lemur sighed. “Thank you for all you’re doing for him.” The screen went dark. The Chancellor looked about the chamber. “Of those sent out to look for and ask an Elder squirrel, this was the only one possibly willing to speak to us so far. All the others either fled or said, ‘No, Biggen leave now!’”

Aldin raised his hand and was recognized. He stepped forward. “Have you asked Giguere for his video footage? He once was a student of Dr. Raoul Kaynobble. Most likely, he had a body camera on him during the entire trip. If that footage shows intelligent conversations between him and the Elder, wouldn’t that be enough proof that said Elder was self-aware? I yield the floor.”

The debate was short, and Aldin’s suggestion was adopted. They sent a request to Giguere. He indicated he’d need a day to process the footage. Parliament agreed to adjourn until the footage was made available. A day later, Parliament watched it starting with the interactions with the squirrel Butternut had raised, then the interactions with the other squirrel who led Giguere to the Elder and finally the Elder. Roundear and Swifttail provided translation throughout.

The resulting debate was short and most agreed that the wild cousin squirrels in the footage were self-aware and intelligent. There were some holdouts who wanted to question the Elder directly. All they could do was wait.

The wild cousin squirrel slowly stirred. He knew he wasn't in his nest due to the strange sounds and smells. His tail weakly wigwagged nervously as he opened his eyes and blinked a few times in the bright light.

A Biggen raccoon was sitting near him, but with its muzzle near level to his. It smiled at him.

"Elder, you will live," it spoke to him in good chitterspeak.

The squirrel stared at the raccoon. Part of him wanted to flee, but he knew he was too weak. He chattered distressfully. Then he remembered how he had been waiting to die when the Biggen squirrel came. And he agreed to let the Biggen squirrel take him to a Biggen healer. It wasn't like he had the strength at the time to resist.

The raccoon held up a Biggen thing with water in it. "You thirsty?" The Biggen lapped a little at the water. "Is safe."

The squirrel lapped at the offered water. That's when he noticed how the inside of his mouth felt different against the edges of his tongue.

"Broken tooth rot like old log, cause rot in tooth on each side, cause sickness, sickness almost make you die, Elder. Healer remove rot teeth. You need heal more. Then healer make you new teeth. You will be with us Biggens through harvest time."

The old squirrel wigwagged his tail left to right and back. "I choose go to Biggens. I can no go back."

"You no come to Biggens on own. Biggen squirrel take you from nest. Biggen squirrel bring you here. You too weak, too sick to resist or flee."

Again, the squirrel wigwagged his tail left to right and back. "I stay with Biggens through harvest time and go back, I starve. I can no go back."

"We give food when you go back. You no starve. Forest need squirrels. Forest need Elder."

"I no Elder now. Forest have new Elder."

Raoul sighed. "I know new Elder. I know you, Elder. You sire of sire of sire of new Elder."

The squirrel looked long and hard at Raoul. "You!" his tail wigwagged nervously finally recognizing the raccoon. "You Biggen who make squirrels sleepy. Poke squirrels while sleepy."

“And guard squirrels from predators until wake. And leave food.”

“Why you here at healer place?”

“Healer no hear, no speak chitterspeak. I do.”

“You no here make me sleepy?”

Raoul chuckled. “Healer no need me for that. Healer make you sleepy. He take rot tooth while you sleep. When you sleepy feel less pain. Sleepy heal faster. Rest, Elder. Rest, sleep, and heal. Biggen Elders wait for you.”

The squirrel drifted back to sleep.

EIGHTEEN

Consciousness came quicker this time. The Biggen raccoon was by his side again. It offered him water which he lapped. A Biggen hedgehog stood nearby.

“How long?” the squirrel asked.

“You sleep seven days,” Raoul held up seven claws, “Elder hungry?”

“How I eat? Healer take tooth.” The squirrel poked around with his tongue and made a painful expression when he poked at the area where the teeth had been.

“You can no chew, Elder. Mouth need heal more. You must eat like young pup.” Raoul opened a small tub of butternut paste. “Biggen squirrel bring you here give you same food. Lick, no chew.”

The squirrel slowly licked at the paste. “Dame warn me long ago, trust Biggens be like pup forever. Is good trade. I no trust Biggens, I die. I trust I be like pup forever and live.”

Raoul chuckled again. “Elder, you will no be pup forever.” He pointed to the hedgehog. This Biggen healer. He make new tooth soon. He make you sleepy again. While sleep healer put in new tooth. You will need to lick paste like this to eat for two tens more days.” Raoul held up all ten claws and then held up all ten again.

Elder’s eyes widened briefly. He then flicked his tail up and down once. “Do what must do.” He licked at more of the paste.

“Biggen Elders wish speak with Elder. They at Biggen Elder meet place. Will you go?”

“Biggens save me. I go talk to Biggen Elders.” The squirrel looked towards the hedgehog. “I go when healer say I go.”

He listened as the two use Biggenspeak. The raccoon then turned again to him. “Healer say Elder wise to ask healer when you go. He say you go soon or go after new tooth. You choose.”

“I go soon.”

“Very well, Elder. I will speak to Biggen Elders.”

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.

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.

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 Biggensspeak on own. You know other squirrels who can Biggensspeak? 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 Biggensspeak 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.

TWENTY-ONE

At the Elder’s tail gesturing, Butternut guided Pinecone over to the Biggen squirrel-size hammock that served as his nest in the hospital room. She snugged down with the grieving squirrel. Soon, both were fast asleep. The Elder turned to Aldin.

“Curious and I talk. Talk lot. Little else can do while wait/heal. Talk or sleep. Talk more interesting. Butternut, Curious mates. Curious tell me Friend sick near death. Biggen healer take blood from Butternut and put in Friend. Butternut blood save Friend’s life.”

“Yes, Elder.”

“Friend, Butternut share blood. Friend, Butternut mates. Curious, Friend now like litter mates. Both Butternut mates.”

Aldin wigwagged his tail left to right. “No, Elder, I no Butternut mate.”

“Curious explain how Friend’s people different. Live in colony. Share big territory. Friend no there. Friend here. Rule here different. Curious say you see eight winters. I see ten. Biggen healer let me see eleven. Make me Elder to Friend. Friend must listen. Friend join Biggens. Friend call self, smart squirrel when join Biggens. If Friend smart squirrel, Friend must obey smart squirrel rule: you share blood or try make pups, you mates. Friend, Butternut share blood. Friend, Butternut mates.” The Elder squirrel shook his head. “Now Friend, Pinecone soon mates.”

“What!?!” Aldin exclaimed in Common as his tail wigwagged about in panic. Raoul translated the exclamation.

“You hear Pinecone mate...”

“Twig.”

“Twig speak as die. Speak: ‘Friend now care for you.’ Twig choose you replace Twig as Pinecone mate. Pinecone mourn Twig now. Pinecone will heal. Pinecone then choose Friend as new mate.” The Elder shook his head again. “Twig no know Friend, Butternut mates. Is problem. Butternut, Pinecone may fight.”

Aldin continued to wigwag his tail in near panic and looked towards Raoul for help.

Raoul held-up his hands. “Friend know how Curious feel.” He looked towards the Elder. “Butternut was Biggen squirrel. Accident change her to smart squirrel. Butternut know smart squirrel rule: Share blood or try make pups, mates. Butternut, Curious share blood and try make pups. We try make pups before accident change Butternut from Biggen to smart squirrel. We share blood and try make pups again after she return from forest to show we still mates. Butternut, Curious mates. Friend our friend. Get very sick. Sick sleep near death. Need share blood or Friend die. I ask Butternut share blood. She scared share blood. Fear Friend make her leave me. I ask again. She share blood. Friend heal, wake, and live. Butternut think Friend second mate. Try chose Friend. Try hard. I try help. Friend refuse. Friend close friend, no mate.”

The Elder looked at both of them. “Friend sick sleep when Butternut share blood? Curious no explain when we speak Friend sick sleep when share blood.”

“I sick sleep, Elder,” Aldin added. “I no know blood share at time. I sleep near death.”

The Elder closed his eyes. “That different. Friend no choose share blood. Butternut, Friend no mates.”

Aldin visibly relaxed at the pronouncement. “Thank the Spirit,” he mumbled quietly in English.

The Elder looked at him strangely.

“Our Biggens different, Elder. Speak different Biggenspeak. I express thanks to Creator that I and Butternut no mates. Biggen Elders send me all over world. I no stay in home territory long. I no around to help raise pups. I no make good sire/mate. Is why I no want mate.”

Raoul added, “As we speak before, Elder, Friend’s people only mates if try make pups. Butternut wants pups. I no squirrel. I can no make pups with her. Can only try.” Raoul drooped his tail squirrel like. “I know my mate, Elder. She want pups. She no force Friend make pups. If Pinecone chose Friend as mate, I think Butternut no fight.” Raoul shrugged. “Butternut might try choose Elder. She wants pups. You tried to get her choose you before you know she small Biggen. Biggen Elders have spoken. Squirrel and Biggens can now be mates.”

The Elder wigwagged his tail a bit on that last part. “Good. Butternut, Pinecone must no fight. Butternut Biggen Elder. Biggen Elders make Pinecone Elder. Is no good if Elders fight. Butternut try choose me, I no fight Curious. You first mate. I only give chase if you say yes. She make good dame.” He yawned. “Many things we must speak.” He yawned again. “Can wait. Sleep now.” He moved towards the hammock bed. “Friend join Butternut, Pinecone, and Elder.”

“I will, Elder. Twig order me protect Pinecone until return or he bite me hard.” He drooped his tail. “He can no bit me hard now if I fail. I no fail Twig. I will protect Pinecone until she return her territory.”

The Elder nodded and turned to Raoul. “Curious, Biggen nest too small or I ask you join us. Is right, you should be with mate sleep time.” The Elder drooped his tail “We see you sunrise?”

“No, Elder, I stay like I have since Biggen squirrel bring you here.” Raoul moved over by the hammock and curled-up on the floor under it. The Elder led Aldin up into the Biggen hammock. They snuggled down with the others and were soon fast asleep.

TWENTY-TWO

Aldin slowly stirred. Someone gigglechittered and then two someones nuzzled each of his ears. That caused him to snap fully awake. Both Pinecone and Butternut tumbled out of the hammock before he could determine who had nuzzled which ear. The two gigglechittered at his startled look.

Aldin blinked a couple times and rubbed his eyes with the back of his paws. “We’ve been nesting together since the start of the face-to-face Parliament session. And neither of you tried to pull anything like that before now.” He dropped down to the floor, landing with ease on all four paws. He looked about. “Where’s the Elder and Raoul?”

Pinecone pulled her flatpanel off her back and tapped away. “The Elder woke-up early and wanted to go outside and stretch his legs. We joined him and let you sleep. He’s currently being examined by the hedgehog healer...”

“Dr. Territan,” Butternut added in.

Pinecone turned to Butternut and chittered a thanks before continuing. “So, we came back to check on you. Finding you were still asleep and it’s time to get something to eat, we decided to wake you up.” Pinecone scuffed a paw. “It was my idea that if you didn’t wake-up when we got back in the hammock that we’d nuzzle your ears.” She fought back tears a moment. “It always worked to wake...” (sniffle) “Twig.”

Tears started to roll down her muzzle as Butternut went to comfort her again. It only took a couple of ceklicks for her to pull herself together again. She started tapping away again. “I watch

message from Jessophat/Kind. I saw the giant owl.” She shuddered. “If Saniel had been alone, Jessophat and Caroline would still be looking for him not knowing he’d been killed and eaten.” She shed a few more tears. “Twig was so brave to save his life.”

Aldin drooped his tail while nodding. “Yes, Twig was very brave to hunt and kill the owl and save Saniel’s life.”

Pinecone tapped away on the flatpanel. “Twig did not trust you, yet did trust you, Aldin. He ordered you to protect me until I return to our territory.” She drooped her tail. “I don’t know when I’ll now return there. Maybe I find a new home in one of the other forests. I release you from that order as he can’t.” A few more tears fell from her eyes, but she held things together.

Was it that easy? Or was he being tested? Aldin slowly wigwagged his tail left to right and back again looking from one female cousin squirrel to the other. “Did the two of you speak with the Elder about me this morning?”

“Yes,” Butternut responded first. “We had a long discussion with the Elder. I will no longer try to get you to chase me unless you show interest first.” She scuffed a paw. “Despite your initial reassurances in that hospital room, I felt obligated to try and win you over. The Elder reassured me that my giving you blood didn’t make us mates.”

Aldin nodded and turned towards Pinecone.

She started tapping away again on her flatpanel. “As I said before Twig did not trust you and did trust you. What he say when he die is...” she paused a moment trying to come-up with the word. “Suggestion. I no try make you chase me unless, as Butternut say, you show interest. I understand you think you would not be a good father/mate because you travel all the time.” She scuffed a paw. “Well, for the coming season at least, I, too will be travelling all the time. We’ll see what comes, yes? Truce for now?”

Aldin agreed to that and hugged both tightly thanking them.

As they pulled apart, the Elder and Raoul entered the room.

“Biggen healer say I can eat soft food. We go to room with food. Come.”

They all went down to the cafeteria where the Elder squirrel nibbled on soft pine nuts with a large smile on his muzzle, while the others ate what they wished.

Over the next two weeks the Elder did discuss many different things with them. He quickly understood the real danger of living among Biggens long. He found their tools useful. He could see why the ancient Elder wanted to keep squirrels from knowing Biggen things. He also felt there were some Biggen tools that could be used to help squirrels without the temptation to join

Biggens. One example was the backpack Friend showed him that allowed him to carry things without needing to place them in his mouth. He could carry many more seeds and nuts at one time in it. He suggested to Aldin that they bring squirrel-size backpacks filled with food as gifts to the Elders they visited. Aldin agreed, tapping into a bank account that Parliament had assigned for his and Pinecone's expenses on their worldwide trip to the various forests to cover the costs after sending off a message to Parliament about the Elder's suggestion.

Throughout all this, the Elder slowly graduated to slightly harder and harder food until he could eat hard nuts with ease. The Biggen hedgehog healer, Dr. Territan, declared him fully healed two days early.

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 chattered.

"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, chattering 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 chattered out a greeting loudly. He listened. Faintly, he heard a reply from towards sunrise. He chattered 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 cekklicks) 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.

TWENTY-FOUR

As Aldin predicted, a whole season nearly passed by as the three of them went from forest to forest passing the news. They were not always welcomed, but they were tolerated thanks to the presence of the former Elder. Roughly half accepted the backpacks. The Elder was amazed at the change in seasons from one side of the world to the other. When they started it was fall harvest time in his home forest. On the other side of the world just weeks later, squirrels where tending to their pups in spring weather.

Much to his disappointment, they never found Aldin's people as he had hoped. Aldin had warned him they would not find his people. Through all this, they rode from place to place on a giant Biggen flyer called a flitter piloted by a Biggen otter named, Charlos. A Biggen beaver, Dauvid, served as their 'steward' providing them food and drink as needed. Pinecone and Friend knew the two Biggens. The Elder began to understand Biggenspeak and grew less nervous around Biggens.

He began to teach Pinecone and Aldin the ways and knowledge of squirrel Elders. Though all this as the weeks went by, he also watched a change in Pinecone and Aldin towards each other. Whether or not they realized it themselves, they grew closer to one another. He smiled happily at his observations of the two without pointing it out to them. He knew they would figure it out on their own in time.

After many, many weeks, they found themselves in the portion of Earth the Biggens called the Central Lakes and Forests District Region and were soon back in Pinecone's territory. She introduced Jessophat, Caroline, and Sanial to the former Elder. The Biggen squirrels then embraced Pinecone as they cried into each other's shoulders over Twig's death. The Elder was not as surprised now as he would have been at first to learn their pup had seen as many winters as he had.

Conversations were muted during the dinner the Biggens shared with their three cousin squirrel guests. All three ate many, many butternuts. They learned that the Biggen authorities had searched throughout the local forest after the attack. They had found the owl's nest. Owl pellets were found and taken to a Biggen learning place called a 'university' to be tested. Sadly, the results helped close one missing Biggen pup report from the nearby Biggen village. Aldin struggled to come up with a way to explain the testing to the former Elder. The Elder waived it off responding he understood there were Biggen things that could not be explained in chitterspeak.

"Pinecone?" Jessophat asked pausing in hesitation a moment before continuing. "The officials had taken Twig's body to examine along with the owl. Once they finished, they put his body in stasis until your return. They'll want to know what to do with his body."

Pinecone shed a few tears as Aldin translated and explained to the former Elder.

Pinecone pulled her flatpanel off her back and tapped away. "Ask the officials if they know of a Biggen predator family who need food and would be willing to eat him."

There was a shocked look on the muzzles of all three Biggen squirrels. The Elder nodded in approval as Aldin translated, though the Elder had understood most of the Biggenspeak sentence on his own.

Pinecone continued. "It is our way. If die without predator doing the killing, we lay the body on the forest floor and let carrion eaters have it. Before I do the same for Twig, I would like to offer his body to Biggens who may need the food. Biggens help us. We help Biggens."

“I will inform them,” Jessophat reassured her.

Pinecone tapped away some more. “I want to go look at my nest hollow. Aldin, would you come with me, please?”

Aldin glanced at their hosts and the former Elder.

“I stay here,” the former Elder stated.

It didn’t take long to reach the nesting hollow. After a quick inspection, Pinecone drooped her tail and began to weep. Aldin hugged her and slowly rocked her back and forth as she began to cry in earnest, shedding tears into his fur.

“I no smell Twig scent,” she managed between sobs.

“It’s been a full season since his death, Pinecone,” Aldin stated in Common. “I’m not sure what customs are here. If you really want to remember his scent, you could ask those who have his body to give you a tuft of his fur as a keepsake.”

She partially pulled back from him to look him straight on. She wigwagged her tail up and down once in the affirmative. “Good idea. I ask Kind to ask for me.” She stared into his eyes. “I left Biggen viewer at Kind’s nest. Is hard say this in Chitterspeak. I no want stop being Biggen Voice. I no...”

“You aren’t looking forward to this last meeting, are you?”

She nodded. “After done, you leave. Twig choose Friend replace Twig. I promise no chase Friend if Friend say no. I no want you leave. I want you stay with me.”

Aldin pulled her back into a hug. “Who says I want to leave? You have seen what my life is like now for a full season or as Biggens measure it two-and-half-months. You’ve stayed by my side through that, Pinecone, with no complaints. I’ve become as attracted to you as you have to me. You think I don’t want to have you snuggled down next to me at night? As to Twig’s suggestion,” Aldin nicked a forepaw with the claw of his other paw. Before he could do likewise to her, she stopped him.

“No,” she said.

Aldin looked at her in shock. “You don’t want me as your mate? You just said you want me to stay.”

“It is not the way of your people, Friend.” She paused a moment and tickled his chin with her tail tip. “We be mates your people rule and mine. Wrong time to chase.” She gently nibbled the base

of one of his ears. “We still try make pups with no chase first. If we no chase, no pups. Come, Friend, my mate.” She gently tugged him into the nesting hollow.

Aldin did not hesitate and allowed himself to be drawn into the nest.

They returned to their hosts nearly two clicks later.

Jessophat greeted them stating, “I was starting to worry about you two. Neither of you took your flatpanels with you.”

Carulin glanced at her flatpanel a moment. “We were worried as there is a major snowstorm coming. Will the three of you stay with us through the storm?”

Aldin and Pinecone turned to the former Elder. He looked at both of them. Everyone noticed they were very close side-by-side.

“I feel storm coming,” the Elder said. “How is nest?”

Pinecone drooped her tail. “I chase around world with Friend and you all harvest time. I look at nest. Nest no ready for winter storm. Nest no keep us warm in storm. We stay in nest, we freeze die.”

The Elder nodded. “We stay with Biggen squirrels if they no overfeed us.”

The others all gigglechattered at that.

“Thank you, Elder,” Pinecone replied, “for chose stay with Biggens. You, I, and mate all safer and warmer here. Kind is fitting name for Biggen who share his nest with us.”

She snuggled up to Aldin and wrapped her tail around him. He did likewise without hesitation nuzzling her affectionately.

The Elder leaned over to his host and whispered, “See, I speak true when Pinecone and Friend go out. Now they mates.” Jessophat simply nodded.

TWENTY-FIVE

The storm raged for three days leaving over a mit of snow on the ground. It was a good decision to not try and wait it out in Pinecone’s old nest hollow. It was likely they would have frozen to death if they had tried, never mind a lack of food. There was no worry on either staying with

Jessophat/Kind. Like the former Elder, Parliament would ensure Pinecone had enough food until spring once she was done her assignment.

They had saved her forest for last as she was an outcast. She wasn't looking forward to this meeting as she had admitted to Aldin before the storm. However, it needed to be done, so that the work Parliament had sent them out to do would finally be finished. Hopefully, they didn't instantly chase her away with the Elder present. After this, they needed to report back to Parliament. That could be done through the large flatpanel at Jessophat's home.

It took little time in the hovercraft to venture back into the portion of the forest she hadn't set paw within for many seasons. The hovercraft settled softly into the top of the fresh snow sinking just a little bit. The door opened. She moved towards the opening determined to get this done with. The former Elder stopped her before she could leap out into the snow towards the nearest tree.

"Hush, listen," he chittered quietly.

All they heard was the breeze in the tree branches. There was no bird song or any other animal noise.

"It's too quiet," the former Elder stated wigwagging his tail nervously. He pointed outside with his tail. "There are no tracks. No squirrel has come this way today. With deep snow, maybe they burrow here like small rodents."

Pinecone shook her head in the negative. "I no burrow. I no think others burrow."

"Well, there's one way to find out if there are any squirrels about," Aldin stated. He stepped over by the entryway and chittered loudly up into the trees. "We come, seek squirrel Elder!"

There was silence for a moment and then a faint warning scree echoed back. "Biggens beware! Truce! Big predator bird. Flee!"

"SCREEEEEE!!!!!!" Pinecone screamed as she yanked the Elder aside back away from the hovercraft opening.

Aldin saw the giant owl descending towards him rapidly, "SPIRIT!" He exclaimed before shouting, "CLOSE!", in Common. The hovercraft's door quickly closed. "There's another one?!"

Aldin didn't have time to vocalize the rest of his thoughts as the giant owl slammed hard into the clear dome of the hovercraft, causing the craft to shake violently and shift in the snow. It sat stunned briefly on the ledge between the clear dome roof and the side of the hovercraft. It quickly came to its senses, hooting in frustration. It tried to scratch at the dome with one large taloned foot, leaving scratch marks in it. After a couple more tries, it spread its two mit wide wingspan, leapt into the air, flapping its wings, and headed back up into the trees and was quickly out-of-sight.

“Spirit, it’s huge!” He exclaimed in Common. “Larger than any owl back home!” He turned to the flatpanel built into the hovercraft. “Video communication: Connect to Jessophat!”

The hovercraft’s built-in flatpanel remained dark. He scampered over to it and tapped it. Nothing. He wigwagged his tail in frustration.

“Return to previous coordinates,” he ordered.

The hovercraft rose briefly and then settled back in the snow. A purple light lit-up brightly on the instrument cluster.

“Open door.” The door opened. “Close door.” It closed. “Return to previous coordinates.” Again, the hovercraft rose briefly and then settled back in the snow. The purple light on the instrument cluster remain lit.

Aldin sighchittered as he turned to the others. “We stuck,” he said in chitterflick. “Owl damage Biggen flyer. I no know how fix flyer.”

Pinecone reached for her flatpanel before remembering she and Aldin and left theirs at Jessophat’s as it was thought they wouldn’t need them. She moved over by Aldin and tapped at the built-in flatpanel. It partially lit for her but the image was scrambled in large square blocks. She tried placing a call to Jessophat. The flatpanel went dark and a second purple light lit-up on the instrument cluster.

Aldin pointed outside the dome with his tail where the antenna used to be.

“Owl break part needed for Biggen viewer to work.” He drooped his tail. After a moment, he looked at them. “We can no stay here. We must try flee to trees. Try reach squirrel who warn us. If see owl, I lure back to Biggen flyer. Trap owl in flyer.”

“No!” Pinecone declared stamping a rear paw for emphasis.

“You have better idea?” Aldin asked.

Pinecone shed a few tears as she pulled him close to her, wrapping her tail around him. “No. I no have better idea. Owl kill Twig. I no want owl hunt/kill Friend.”

“I no want owl hunt/kill Pinecone or Elder. We can no stay here.” He pointed to the deep scratches in the dome with his tail as he gently pulled out of the embrace. “Owl come back, owl break in. Owl hunt/kill/eat us. We can no stay. No room dodge owl. We must flee.”

The former Elder stepped in. “Friend speak truth, Pinecone. We can no stay here. We must flee.”

She looked about and then back at the other two and nodded.

“Ready?” Aldin asked the others. They flicked their tails up and down once indicating they were.

“Open door!” he ordered in Common, followed by, “Go!” in chitterspeak.

The hovercraft’s door slid open and all three leapt out in the snow sinking a bit with each leap, scurrying as fast as they could to clear the five mit distance towards the nearest tree. They started climbing upward as fast as they could.

A warning scree echoed through the forest, this time a bit closer.

Aldin paused on a tree branch and looked about. He urged the other two to keep going as he turned tail and headed back towards the hovercraft. He spotted the huge owl, silently gliding in. He could tell it had spotted him as it changed course towards him. He leapt from the tree and into the imprints he and the others had made from the hovercraft, hoping not to sink further as the snow had been packed down. He felt his skin crawl as he leapt from snow imprint to snow imprint back towards the hovercraft. He sank deeply into the third imprint. He took a brief sideways glance to see the huge bird quickly coming in for him. He frantically started digging as his heart raced.

Pinecone paused high up in a near by tree.

“We need to keep moving!” the former Elder chided Pinecone.

Pinecone ignored him. She stared down in horror as the owl dropped into the snow where Aldin had sunk, talons extended. “NO!!!!” she screeched.

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/frreeze 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.

EPILOGUE

Giguere powered down the hovercraft. It settled in the snow. He stepped out into the forest. “I seek Elder!” he called out in chitterspeak. He paused and waited a moment and then heard the distant reply, “I know Biggen squirrel voice. Biggen come.” He gauged where the reply came from and walked through the snow towards the direction of the voice and then climbed the tree carefully. He arrived at the same nesting hollow he had pulled the old Elder out of the previous summer. He sat on a nearby branch large enough to hold his weight. The present Elder poked her head out of the opening and looked at him.

“Is you, Biggen squirrel who take Great Grandsire to Biggen healer. Speak. Why you come?”

“Elder, I bring word from your Great Grandsire.”

She came out and up onto the branch near the Biggen squirrel. “Speak.”

Giguere slowly pulled a small flatpanel off his side where it had stuck to his fur and showed it to the cousin squirrel. “This Biggen tool. Name viewer. Biggens use tool speak over far distance. With this, Great Grandsire speak to you.”

He gently tapped it with a clawed fingertip and it lit-up. The cousin squirrel jumped back a bit and wigwagged her tail nervously. An image of her great grandsire appeared on the viewer. It smiled at her while wigwagging his tail in greeting.

“Great Grandpup! This special Biggen tool let us speak far, far away.” His tail drooped. “I very far, far away. Biggen help me with this part.” His image shrank down and moved to the upper right corner. A rotating image of Earth filled most of the screen. “This show whole world.” A purple dot appeared. “This where you are.” The world continued to rotate. About a quarter rotation later, a blue dot appeared. “This forest I in now. Sunrise here, sun six paws up sky where you are.”

His great grandpup chattered nervously, wigwagging her tail. “Is very far, far away. You teach me in Elder ways, Great Grandsire, how world round like butternut. I no know how big world is.”

The image disappeared and the old Elder's image took-up the whole viewer again. He flicked his tail up and down once in the affirmative. "I no know how big world is when I teach you Elder ways. World very, very big. Is why I ask Biggen squirrel for help speak to you. I visit all forests of world with small Biggen Elder, Friend, and Pinecone who Biggen Elders make Elder Voice. I wish speak story one time all Elders. As Biggens say, I sign off now. Come back after you call other Elders." The flatpanel went dark.

The cousin squirrel stared up Giguere. "How this viewer tool work, Biggen?"

Giguere drooped his tail. "I can no explain in chitterspeak, Elder. Biggens know many things Have many tools. This one tool."

She accepted the answer and called the other Elders together. As they arrived, they kept a bit of distance upon seeing the Biggen squirrel. She went to them and explained about the Biggen. They hesitantly approached. He held still as they sniffed him.

"Are backpacks useful?"

They hesitantly agreed raising their tails and flicking them down once.

"Good. Old Elder send me. Asked this Elder," he pointed to the squirrel in question with his tail, "his great grandpup, to call you here."

"Why, Biggen? Why you here?"

"To allow old Elder speak to you."

They looked about and sniffed the air. "We no see, hear, smell old Elder. Where old Elder?" "He far, far away," Giguere replied patiently. "This Biggen tool we use speak to each other when far, far away." He let them sniff it.

"Wait, you see old Elder soon," his great grandpup said.

This time, Giguere hung the small flat panel onto the trunk of the tree. He then placed the call again and the old Elder answered much to the others' amazement.

"Elders, I have much to speak. I far, far away," again he showed the image of Earth to show where he was compared to them and the time difference.

The others chattered nervously as they glanced at each other.

"Is special Biggen tool let me speak to you with no travel. One danger of trust Biggens. Some their tools very useful. Tempt you use other tools. Soon, you Biggen too. I become like small Biggen." He drooped his tail. "I travel all over world with small Biggen Elder Friend, and Pinecone, squirrel made Biggen Elder Voice. Speak new Biggen Elder rules to squirrels in all forests. Take from time I see you at begin harvest time through," he held up seven claws, "days

ago. We come to this forest, Pinecone home territory, last. I chose claim territory in this forest. I no return to your forest. Friend and Pinecone now mates. Pinecone growing pups. Pinecone dame this forest Elder.”

He explained all that had happened since he left on his journey at the beginning of autumn. Giguere retrieved food from the hovercraft to share with the Elders as they listened to the old elder speak for over two clicks on all that had occurred.

“...Big predator bird hunt/kill most squirrels here. Small Biggen Friend, trap/kill bird, save squirrels. Squirrels here no have food enough for winter as bird hunt/kill them as try gather food all harvest time into winter. Biggen squirrel with territory in forest share food and nest with us. No squirrel starve. No squirrel freeze die.”

“Must no trust Biggens!” one of the Elders exclaimed.

The old Elder nodded. “Choose like when I break tooth. Trust Biggens, live. No trust Biggens, starve/freeze die. Trust Biggens no become pup forever. Trust Biggens we become like small Biggens. Better live than die. This Biggen squirrel more like big squirrel. Pinecone call him, Kind. Name fits. Count Friend, Pinecone, and me, two tens and seven,” he held up all ten claws twice and then seven more, “squirrels are all there is here and Kind, mate, and pup. Most squirrels pups, mate of pups, grandpups, mate of grandpups of Elder and Pinecone.” He paused a moment. “This forest needs more squirrels,” he continued in a pleading voice, wigwagging his tail. “Is why I choose take territory here. You know squirrels who need mates and can no find mates, send them to Biggens. Biggens bring them here. They get mates. Biggen Elders send other Biggen squirrels to other forests ask same. Must warn them. They become small Biggens. If one or two squirrels come from each forest will save this forest. Good trade. Become small Biggen, but we save this forest.”

“Great Grandsire, I will ask.”

The former Elder bowed his head in thanks. “Our Elder rule we wait make pups late winter. She no want pups come to dames while we live with Biggen squirrel, Kind.”

“You say Pinecone growing pups?” One of the Elders ask. “She disobey Dame Elder?”

“Pinecone and Friend make pups before Elder make rule. Pinecone surprised pups grow in her. She said she and Friend no chase before try make pups. She no know how pups grow in her if they no chase first.” He gigglechattered. “I guess and her Dame agree, she and Friend be close for tens and tens of days before they choose be mates. Friend follow her to her nest from Biggen squirrel nest. Was far enough to be like chase. When they try make pups, she ready grow pups like after long chase.”

The others nodded. “You still wise Elder. Your new forest’s Elder wise, order no pups while live with Biggens.”

“She no learn Elder things from old Elder. Predator bird hunt/kill old Elder. She see six,” he held up six claws, “winters. She oldest those left, makes her Elder. Young, still wise Elder. I no take her place. She still Elder. I teach her, Friend, and Pinecone Elder things. Biggens have names for all things. I take Biggen name, Teacher. Pinecone Dame Elder take name Tassel.”

He paused for a moment. “Is Biggen squirrel with you?”

“No, Elder named Teacher. Biggen squirrel go back to Biggen flyer, get more food. Is good food.”

“Good, Need speak things no for Biggen hear. In all forests we go to speak new Biggen Elder rules, no Elder see more than,” he held-up nine claws, “winters.”

The others looked at each other and chattered quietly at what the old Elder said sank in.

“Pinecone and Friend see this too.” The old Elder caused the image to turn and show both Friend and Pinecone darting over to be on image.

Both wigwagged their tails in greetings. “Elders of other forest, where this Elder, now called Teacher as he teaches Elder things to others, once claimed territory. We speak what Teacher speak is true. No other Elders in other forests see ten and one,” they held up all ten claws and one more, “winters.” Elder bowed to both of them in thanks as they scampered away out of view of the camera.

The others looked at each other again and chattered in a concerning tone. One of them spoke, “According to Elder rules...”

Teacher stopped him. “I know Elder rules.” He drooped his tail. “I teach all of you Elder things. Makes me Elder of Elders if I choose.”

“You no choose lead all squirrels?”

“I squirrel no more.” Teacher drooped his tail. As I speak before, we all this forest become like small Biggens. I now hear Biggenspeak. If choose, I learn use tool to speak Biggenspeak to Biggens, like Pinecone. I no decide yet. Others start hear Biggenspeak. Is no right I claim Elder of Elders.”

“Great Grandsire, you become small Biggen no matter. You visit, I still welcome. I no chase off as I no chase off Biggen squirrel who bring this tool so you speak to us. You can no choose. You are Elder of Elders.”

The former Elder bowed his head again in thanks before continuing. “Is no time for Elder of Elders to lead all squirrels. I claim place if need. No need right now.”

“Elder of Elders Teacher wise Elder. Biggen squirrel approaches.”

“We speak more on this different time,” Teacher stated.

Giguere returned with a backpack full of seed, which he shared.

Teacher continued. “I near done speak. I know sunset soon your forest. I make big ask. I ask as former Elder your forest. I no ask as Elder.” He left ‘of Elders’ unspoken. “Let Biggen squirrel leave Biggen viewer in nest hollow. Let Biggen squirrel place flat tools on top tree. Flat tools change sunlight to energy run viewer. Can no explain better. Is big ask. You can then use viewer tool speak to me. I to you. You can speak to Biggens with tool. Remember, Biggens promise help squirrels. If Biggens come try hunt squirrels, can speak Biggen Elders speak of Biggens who disobey Biggen Elder rules. Biggens come catch those disobey Biggen Elders. If squirrel break tooth like me, can call Biggen healer come help. Is useful tool.” He suddenly warning chattered briefly. “Is dangerous tool if use wrong. You learn many Biggen things if use wrong.” His tail drooped. “Then you become small Biggen like me.”

The Elders discussed this quietly while his great grandpup chose to stay out of the discussion. The four raised their tails in unison. One spoke for the others. “Old Elder who take name Teacher, if great grandpup agree take risk, we allow.”

“I will take risk,” she responded.

The Elder bowed his head again in thanks. “As Biggens say, I sign off now. Take care.”

Giguere turned to the others. “I return tomorrow place flat tools in tree. No time, sun set soon.” He climbed down, got in the Biggen flyer and left.

The others turned to Teacher’s Great Grandpup. “Head Elder of Elders’ warning of Biggen viewer tool.”

She bowed her head in thanks and understanding. They then departed back to their own territories.