

SEVEN

“Hello?” The citizen pine martin stared at the unfamiliar citizen squirrel on his screen.

“Enh-ray, correct?”

“Yes, and you are?”

“I am Jessophat, recently appointed Elder to this newly formed cousin squirrel colony. It’s a long story. To keep it short, I’ve been hosting Ambassador Aldin Busheytail the Younger, his mate and the other surviving squirrels of the local forest for the winter. They’ve decided to form a colony, sort of like one of our towns, similar to how the Ambassador’s people live on Terra. The ruling body is called a Council of Elders. My family offered to join their colony. They accepted and the next thing I knew I was on the ruling council.” Jessophat shrugged. “The Ambassador indicated you wished to discuss a matter with this forest’s Elder. She is now the head Elder of the council.”

Jessophat tapped a symbol on his flatpanel and the view expanded to show three cousin squirrels sitting nearby. He pointed to each in turn and they nodded as he introduced them, “Elder Pinecone, who you probably saw testify before Parliament last summer. Elder Teacher, the elder who also spoke to Parliament. And Elder Tassel, this forest’s head elder. Pinecone understands Common, as Aldin calls our language. Teacher and Tassel, a little bit. Pinecone knows how to use one of our flatpanel’s blind reader programs to speak Common for her. I’ll serve as interpreter for Elders Tassel and Teacher to you and to clarify best I can if they do not understand something you say. Please note that chitterspeak isn’t as complex as ‘Biggenspeak’ as smart squirrels call Common.”

Tassel chattered and Jessophat translated as promised. “Anything you wish to discuss with me Elder Martin may be discussed in front of the Council.”

Enh-ray hesitated a moment. “Why do you call me Elder?”

“You once served in Parliament, the ‘Biggen Council of Elders, Enh-ray” Pinecone responded tapping away. “Though you didn’t serve long because of what you attempted to do to my current mate. You still served and we will grant you that title.”

Enh-ray nodded. “I don’t deserve that title.”

Tassel chattered again. “Very well,” Jessophat translated. She glanced at Jessophat briefly as she continued to chatter. “Kind, that’s my chitterspeak name, when we address Enh-ray, use his biggen name we can no speak. What is it you wish to discuss with us, Enh-ray?”

Enh-ray looked down a moment. “Did Aldin tell you anything about my conversation with him?”

Jessophat paused briefly listening to Tassel. He chattered back. She chattered some more and Jessophat then spoke to Enh-ray. “Friend is Aldin’s chitterspeak name, Enh-ray,” he explained

before translating. “Elder Voice Friend only speak you wish speak to squirrel elder. So speak. We listen.”

“Parliament has ruled citizens cannot hunt cousin squirrels now that we know you are smart like us. I once killed a squirrel.”

After Jessophat translated to chitter, Teacher chittered. “Kind, show Earth on viewer. Show where Enhray is.”

Jessophat brought up a map of Earth showing where Enhray lived in comparison to Jessophat’s home.

Teacher nodded and chittered some more. “Please show forests near Enhray with smart squirrels.” Jessophat highlighted the forests in question.

Tassel chittered “How long ago and do you remember where?”

Enhray pointed to a forest north of his location. “I was still a child, about twenty years ago. My father took me to the forest and taught me how to hunt. We hunted squirrels.”

Teacher drooped his tail after Jessophat translated. “Squirrel elders that forest no accept viewer. We can no contact them.”

Pinecone tapped away and chittered at the same time. “Even if you could contact them, no one would remember. It was too long ago.” She looked directly at the flatpanel’s camera to try and indicate she was trying to look directly at Enhray. “Please understand, Enhray. You biggens grow much more slowly than we do. We are an adult in about a year versus your sixteen. Teacher is one of the oldest squirrels we met when we traveled around the world telling all the squirrels about the changes your Parliament made in regard to our people. Teacher is eleven. Even if we could easily contact the squirrels of that forest, there is no one who would remember other than a story of a distant relative.”

Tassel chittered again. “Tell me, Enhray, did you know the squirrel you hunt was smart when you hunted.”

“No.”

She didn’t wait for a translation as she continued, “Did you kill quickly?”

“Yes.”

“Did you eat your kill?”

Enhray hesitated a moment. “Yes. I loved the taste. I haven’t had it since.”

After hearing Jessophat's translation, she chittered something and looked to Teacher, Pinecone, and Jessophat. Jessophat chittered back. The chittering went back and forth. They paused and let Jessophat explain in Common. "The Council is discussing what you did. They asked me to weigh in. I have abstained explaining I'm a 'biggen' not a smart squirrel. I should have no say. They have accepted that explanation and continue to discuss among themselves."

As Jessophat finished this, the three cousin squirrels raised their tails briefly. She turned back to the camera, chittering with Jessophat translating again. "By your admission, you did not know the squirrel you hunted was smart. You did not waste the kill. The vote is unanimous. We forgive you."

"Just like that?" Enhray asked with surprise.

They flicked the tails up and down once. "Yes," Jessophat translated.

Pinecone tapped away after the other two looked to her. "As I best understand Common, the others have asked me to reply directly rather than rely on Kind, whose service we have appreciated through this discussion with you.

"We understand we are prey, Enhray, just as you are a biggen predator. While we prefer to not get killed and eaten, we know it can happen. More often than we like, in fact. Most of the squirrels in this forest including my first mate were killed by two owls last year." She paused a moment to wipe a tear from her eye.

"We will not hold a grudge against someone for what they did in the past, especially when they thought they were hunting a dumb animal. However, if you attempted it now, we would press charges as is our right per the laws put forth by your Parliament. And my current mate wouldn't 'save your tail', so to speak, this time." She wigwagged her tail sideways a few times.

Enhray bowed. "I understand. Thank you."