

TWELVE

Teacher wigwagged his tail in greeting at the image on the screen. “Friend, is good to see you.”

“And you, Elder Teacher,” Aldin replied. “Is Elder Tassel near?”

“She and pups resting.”

Aldin smiled. “Pups? They come?”

Teacher wigwagged his tail up and down once in the affirmative. “Pups come yesterday at sunset. Three, healthy strong pups.” He whirled his tail proudly. “Other dames start bare pups. We all busy tend mates.”

“I understand Elder Teacher. I call to give report on Biggen Elder meeting. As you and Tassel are busy, I can speak report to Kind.”

Teacher wigwagged his tail up and down once. “I get Kind.”

The screen went dark for a few ceclicks and Jessophat appeared on screen. “Hello, Aldin,” he greeted in Common.

“Greetings, Jessophat. As the rest of the Council of Elders are busy with pups, I will give my report to you to share with them when they have time to listen.”

“I’ll record this, Aldin, so they can hear your report for themselves.” He winked at Aldin. “And it will give Tassel and Teacher good practice to see how well they understand ‘Biggenspeak’.”

“Teacher understands it quite well. When he acts like he doesn’t understand, he’s pretending, possibly to not scare the other squirrels. Tassel, we’ll see. Very well, here is what has transpired so far...”

An opossum stood at the podium and gaveled the Parliament chamber to order.

“Having spent yesterday reviewing Parliament’s rules and those present having chosen me as Chancellor, I do hereby call this 809th session of Parliament to order. Our first order of business is brought forward to us by Ambassador Aldin Busheytail the Younger.”

Aldin scampered forward wearing a red scarf around his neck and a small pack on his back. He arrived at the speaker’s circle and stood-up. He bowed first to the chancellor, “Thank you, Chancellor.” He then turned to the Parliament members. “As those present are aware, we had two special visitors last session, smart cousin squirrels, one named Pinecone and the other simply going by the title of Elder at the time. What they said resulted in the 808th Parliament setting forth new laws and regulations in regard to cousin squirrels.

“After the 808th Parliament set forth new laws and regulations on cousin squirrels, they then assigned Pinecone with me to go forth to all the world’s forests known to harbor cousin squirrels and inform them of those changes made by this chamber. The Elder joined us and was very helpful. All three of us provided a full report near the very end of the 808th Parliament’s session. The Elder chose to settle in Pinecone’s forest and has taken the name, Teacher. The 808th Parliament also left some things undecided in regards to cousin squirrels. Those things can wait or you can choose to take them up during your session. I didn’t ask to speak today to discuss those issues. I just wanted to remind you that there are ‘loose ends’ that still need to be dealt with at some point.

“I asked to speak first,” he continued, pulling a folded piece of paper out of the pack, and handing it to the chancellor. “As there have been changes in the forest I now call home deep within the Central Lakes and Forest District. As reported at the end of the last session, Pinecone is now my mate. Mid-winter, she bore four healthy pups.” He whirled his tail in pride. He glanced towards the Chancellor who was reading the paper. “I’m selfishly hoping this face-to-face session wraps-up quickly or at least the portion that requires my presence, so I can get back to my mate and our young pups.”

“As the current representative for my new home district can attest,” he bowed to the otter in the front row serving as the Central Lakes and Forest District’s representative, “the winters there are long, cold, and can be harsh. We have storms where we’ve remained bound in Jessophat’s home for three or four days on end. Cousin squirrels usually sleep through storms to conserve energy. That’s been different within Jessophat’s home as there is plenty of food and all have kept warm. So, they have passed the resulting time telling stories. They got me to talk about Terra and how my people live. My people live in what we call a ‘colony,’ which is very similar to what you would call a village or town. We share a territory, working together for the betterment of all within the colony. We use what technology we can access, but also continuing to live in the forest and tending to the trees. At fall harvest, all work together to gather the bounty of the forest to share through the winter. The survivors of Pinecone’s forest and those who have come to join us, realized that how we were living with citizen squirrel, Jessophat, through the winter was similar to how my people live. As such, they voted to try and live as my people do. They have voted in a ruling council, called a Council of Elders. The head Elder is the eldest of those who survived the attacks by the owls. She has chosen the name, Tassel. The other squirrels chose Jessophat, Pinecone, and Teacher as the other members of the Council. As most of them are not citizens at this time, they have appointed me their Ambassador to Parliament as noted on the document the Chancellor is reading.”

The Chancellor passed his flatpanel’s sensor over the document to instantly make a digital copy of it, which was quickly shared throughout the chamber.

“So, now I am an Ambassador for real representing actual people, and not just as an empty title.”

Those present glanced at their flatpanels studying the document. Several hands shot up.

“The honorable representative of the High Dessert District is recognized.”

Aldin did his best to not stare at the strange creature that quickly bounded down almost squirrel-like to the chamber floor, coming to a stop near him. It looked like a cross between a fox, a raccoon, and a lemur. Standing there next to him, she was roughly two-thirds of a mit¹ tall or a good head taller than a citizen squirrel, so she towered over him at roughly double his height. Her head/muzzle were fox like, but her fur pattern was like that of a raccoon as her fur gave her a mask around her eyes. Most of her pelt was medium to dark brown. Her tail was slender and as long as the rest of her body like a lemur's. Like a raccoon's tail, it was ringed in light gray and black. Aldin counted fourteen rings in total. She glanced again at the document on her flatpanel.

"Embassador, how did cousin squirrels write this document?"

"Representative..."

"Josine," she offered her paw in a handshake, which he accepted.

"Representative Josine, while some of the cousin squirrels in our newly formed colony have chosen to learn Common, it will take them some time to comprehend it. My mate, Pinecone, has demonstrated she understands and can write Common. However, not all members of the colony are cousin squirrels. The citizen squirrel, Jessophat, his mate, Carulin, and their son, Sanial, have joined the colony. This is his handwriting. As I mentioned previously, he is a member of Council of Elders and serves as their secretary, recording their decisions. The council voted to do this the 'old fashion way' creating a paper document commissioning me as their Embassador to Parliament. While Pinecone could have made an attempt at this document, Jessophat's handwriting is more legible."

There was some grumblings among the membership. Aldin looked about as he replied. "The last session of this Parliament set forth new rules and laws in regard to cousin squirrels including that they can join 'us' meaning citizens or as they call you 'Biggens' and vice versa. If anyone present wishes to question the paw stamps used in substitution for signatures..." Aldin trailed off as he tapped an icon on his flatpanel. The chamber's large flatpanel lit up showing Jessophat with a bandage around his right arm reading the document to three cousin squirrels in Common and then he repeats it chitterspeak. He and the three cousin squirrels raised their tails in agreement. One by one, starting with Tassel, they stamped the document with an inked forepaw or signed. Jessophat then printed their names next to their pawstamps or signatures. That silenced those that questioned the document.

"Next question Embassador." Josine asked, "What is the name of the colony you now serve as Embassador to?"

Aldin drooped his tail. "I and Jessophat warned the others how 'Biggens' need names for everything. Those I now represent have not settled on a name for our colony/town. For some, it's simply 'Home' or 'The Forest' or 'Our Shared Territory.' Others call it 'The Refuge.' For now, the temporary name is 'The Refuge.' Jessophat's home serves as our central meeting place and refuge in severe weather or for emergencies. Thus, the temporary name chosen. Our current

¹ Mit-meter. Two-thirds of a mit is a little over 2 feet tall.

population is changing as we speak. We had forty-four cousin squirrels when I left counting my pups, and three citizen/Biggen squirrels. We have eighteen pregnant females ready to give birth any day now. If all the pups to be born survive and are healthy, we will have a population of around one hundred-twenty or so.”

There were some whistles of surprise in the chamber.

“Remember, cousin squirrels are different from citizens. The average litter size is four. They bare so many at once due to a high deathrate, either from natural causes or,” he drooped his tail, “predation. Normally, female cousin squirrels are ready to get pregnant in mid-winter for birth at the end of winter/early spring. If conditions are right, they might choose to bare a second litter in late summer.”

“One last question, Ambassador. Has Jessophat and his family denounced their citizenship?”

Aldin wigwagged his tail in agitation. “Of course not! If his name or Carulin’s pops up in the lottery, they will fulfill their duties as citizens and serve in Parliament. It is very helpful for them to have joined the colony, which is no different than if one of you moved from one town to another. This one just happened to form around their home. This colony concept is new to cousin squirrels. It was not my intention to steer them this way. It simply happened after I spoke of my home world and how my people live. Jessophat and Carulin have been very helpful. Jessophat already saved several lives a few weeks back when a large wild cousin martin tried to attack the colony. You saw in the video his arm is bandaged. He is still healing from that incident. I abstained from the discussion and vote to form the colony. When asked why, I explained that I did not wish to influence them either way.”

“Thank you, Ambassador,” Josine responded. “I have no further questions.” The strange to Aldin looking representative returned to her seat. No others raised their hands. Aldin assumed they must have had the same questions as Josine. After a nod from the Chancellor, he continued as if there had been no interruption to his presentation.

“As newly appointed Ambassador for ‘The Refuge,’ our Council of Elders asked me to convey their sincerest gratitude for the assistance ‘Biggens’ have given them to help them survive the winter...”

“And that is all I have to report for the moment, Jessophat. After I passed on the council’s thanks, they moved to other business. We do need to settle on a name for the colony unless the membership votes to keep ‘The Refuge’.

“I will pass it on, Aldin. We will get back to you as soon as we can.”

“Thank you, Jessophat. I should sign-off now. Pass my love onto Pinecone for me.”

“Will do. Take care, Ambassador.”