

ONE

Teacher, the forest's former Elder appeared on screen before his great grandpup, the current forest's Elder. He smiled at his great grandpup, wigwagging his tail in greeting.

"Great Grandsire."

"I see Biggen squirrel put tools up right. I can see and hear you, Great Grandpup."

"Yes, Biggen squirrel show me how to make Biggen viewer work. He asked me try tool. He is outside nest hollow. He too big to come in nest hollow."

"I no speak long, Great Grandpup. Biggen squirrel Kind need viewer for Biggen things."

"I understand. Biggen squirrel with no chitterspeak name wait outside." She leaned away from the flatpanel to look out of the hollow's opening. "Biggen viewer work good."

"Good," Giguere said from outside. "I leave now. You know how call me if need help."

She turned back to the image of her great grandsire. "I miss you, Great Grandsire. Being Elder is hard."

Teacher drooped his tail on screen. "Yes, is hard being Elder. You are good Elder. Call if you need me. I must go."

She nodded and ended the call. She flourished her tail in pride upon successfully ending the call on the first try.

Teacher wigwagged his tail in greeting when his great grandpup answered the call.

"Great Grandsire! Is snowing. I can no speak long. Snow cover flat tools on treetop."

Teacher flicked his tail up and down once to indicate he understood.

"I call back tomorrow."

Teacher wigwagged his tail in greeting when his great grandpup answered the call. She did likewise.

"Is good to see you, Great Grandsire."

“I always happy to see you, Elder Great Grandpup. Has snow stopped? Do you have time? I show you Biggen squirrel Kind’s nest he share with squirrels. Is big. Real big.”

“Snow stopped. I use tail, clear snow from flat tools top of tree. Is near sleep time here, Great Grandsire. I have time to see, then I sleep.”

“Good.” He slowly turned around holding his flatpanel, showing how big the lit-up room in the tree was. “Biggens have light tools in the hollows. This just one hollow. Biggens have many hollows in tree. This is where all squirrels come eat.”

She chattered appreciatively. “Is big.”

Teacher flicked his tail up and down once in the affirmative. “I go to next hollow, carry viewer on back. It stick to fur like sticky weed.” Teacher placed the small flatpanel on his back where it clung to his fur. He scampered out of the main chamber Jessopha/Kind and his family used as a combination dining/living space. The view showed the ceiling bouncing along as he scampered. Then the view changed to a vertical tunnel briefly before going dark. She could still here his claws scrabble along the edges of the vertical tunnel. The camera view changed again showing Teacher’s face barely visible. “As I speak before, Biggens have light tools in the hollows.” Teacher touched something on the wall and the hollow lit-up showing his face clearly again. He rotated around, showing sacks large as a cousin squirrel stacked floor to ceiling. “This one of many food middens. Kind speak true when say he can feed all squirrels here through winter.”

“Is as Dame warn me long ago about Biggens.”

Teacher flicked his tail up and down once in the affirmative. “Tassel and I speak alone with Kind and mate, Sunshine. They understand they must no overfeed squirrels. Must keep squirrels from depending on Biggens come spring. They understand. They no want squirrels depend on them. I show you sleeping hollow next.”

The view changed back to the ceiling and the bouncing view again, back to the vertical tunnel to black, then to another level with low light. His face appeared again on the viewer. “This is one of the hollows Kind give us for sleeping.” He slowly turned in a circle showing various piles of nesting material. “We all keep very warm here. No squirrel freeze die here.” Some other squirrels all with peppery gray fur and rounded ears are in the room. They see Teacher and wigwag their tails in greeting. One scampers over.

“Elder Teacher, who you speak to?”

“Great grandpup, Elder my old forest.” The view changed to show the other squirrel. “Great grandpup, this Tassel, this forest’s Elder.”

Both bowed slightly to each other through the screen and wigwagged their tails in greeting.

“I show great grandpup how big Biggen squirrel Kind’s nest is.”

“Is very, very big,” Tassel replied. “Teacher speak fondly of you, Elder.” A chattering racket in the background makes her glance off screen and droop her tail. “I must go. You Elder, you know what like.” The camera focused again on Teacher.

“Two squirrels argue, Tassel need settle argue. No good squirrels fight here. Biggen squirrel Kind give much food. Allow us share nest. Keep warm. No reason squirrels fight here.”

“No good squirrels fight ever,” his great grandpup replied.

“You wise Elder, Great Grandpup.”

“You teach me good, Great Grandsire.”

“I show you one more hollow.” Again, she watched the bouncing ceiling image followed by a tunnel, near darkness and then Teacher’s muzzle again after lights appear. He slowly rotated again showing a huge hollow like the initial one. “This is where Biggen visitors stay. Kind no get many Biggen visitors in winter. Snow too deep.” Again, briefly, she watched the bouncing ceiling and then saw Teacher again. “Biggens have many tools.” He rotated around showing a strange hollow with a smooth white trough in the floor. “This is where Biggen visitors make bad water and leave pellets. Squirrels here use this tool when too snowy or cold windy to go outdoors to make bad water and leave pellets. After use, water come through depression like fast moving stream and takes bad water/pellets away.”

Teacher hung the flatpanel on the wall. He demonstrated by straddling the trough and squatting a moment. The camera angle was such she could not see the pellets he defecated into the trough. He then stepped aside, and suddenly, there was a woosh of water, washing away his feces. “I no understand how it work, Great Grandpup.”

“Is strange, Great Grandsire Teacher. I see is useful tool. No pellets/bad water left in hollow in bad weather. Keep nest hollow clean. I understand why you fear squirrels learn Biggen tools like this.”

Teacher flicked his tail up and down once in agreement as he pulled the flatpanel back off the wall and held it closer to his muzzle.

“Where does it take bad water and pellets, Great Grandsire? If pellets no land on forest floor, how can insects/worms break down make into food for trees?”

Teacher drooped his tail. “I no know. I ask Kind later. I sign off now. I miss your scent, Great Grandpup. I miss sharing winter nest with you. Biggen tool let us see/hear each other, but no scent.”

“I miss you, Great Grandsire. Take care.”

TWO

“Hello?” Jessophat stared at the screen still half-asleep. “Who’s calling?”

Teacher’s Great Grandpup stared a moment at the screen not understanding the Biggenspeak. “I call for Great Grandsire Teacher,” she chittered. “You Biggen squirrel Kind?”

Jessophat smiled at the image on his flatpanel and switched to Chitterspeak. “Yes, I Kind. You Elder forest Teacher come from, his Great Grandpup. He proud of you.” He yawned. “Did Teacher explain time different here?” He glanced to one side briefly. “Sun no rise for four...pawspans, here.”

Teacher’s Great Grandpup’s eyes widened as she drooped her tail. “I so sorry. I forget. No mean wake Kind.”

“Is alright, Elder of far forest,” Jessophat reassured her. “After sunrise here, I tell Teacher you call. Ask him call you back.”

She bowed in thanks and ended the call. Jessophat shook his head in amusement, set the flatpanel down and crawled back into the nesting area he shared with his mate, curled back around her, and was quickly back asleep. Unlike other ‘Biggens’, he and his mate had found they preferred a wild cousin’s kind of natural materials bedding nest over a hammock bed.

Teacher wigwagged his tail in greeting when his great grandpup answered the call. She did likewise.

“Is good to see you, Great Grandsire.”

“I always happy to see you, Elder Great Grandpup. Kind speak you call last night.”

His great grandpup drooped her tail. “Yes, I excited want share news. I forget sunrise here before sunrise in your forest. No mean wake Kind.”

“What news you share?”

She chittered off screen and a second squirrel came into view. He nuzzled Teacher’s Great Grandpup and she did likewise.

“Elder to sunset and I now mates, Great Grandsire.”

Teacher smiled wigwagging his tail in appreciation. “Good,” he stated. “I watch Elder to sunset our territory try catch you attention before I break teeth, Great Grandpup. I wonder when you choose him.”

“You approve?”

“You no pup, you no need me approve. You choose who you choose. You ask, I answer. You wise, make good choose. He good sire with old mate. He make good sire to you/his pups.”

His great grandpup’s new mate bowed to the image on screen in thanks. “Old Elder kind. Still wise Elder.”

“May you have many, many pups, enjoy many winters together,” Teacher stated.

“I move to his nest hollow, Great Grandsire. Close to center our combined territory. When pups come, no want pups near Biggen viewer tool.”

Teacher nodded. “Wise choose, Great Grandpup.” He paused a moment. “We pick time future calls. Must no wake Biggen squirrel Kind at night again.”

“Agreed. Call again,” she held-up seven claws, “days at this time?”

Teacher flicked his tail up and down once in agreement. “Small Biggen Friend speak that seven,” he held up seven claws. “I sad how much chitterspeak we lose. Is good learn more chitterspeak from Friend.”

His great grandpup flicked her tail up and down once in agreement. “Seven. I like that, easier. I call again seven days. If snowing, call day after that.”

“Agreed.” Teacher paused a moment and then held up one claw at a time and gave the chitterspeak word for each number as Friend had taught him. His great grandpup and her new mate were delighted to have names for each number. Both agreed the names were easier to use.

“You choose good name, Elder Teacher,” her mate praised him.

Teacher bowed in thanks. “Before end call, Kind’s dame visit two days ago. Most squirrels scared of strange Biggen. She more like other Biggens than big squirrel. I brave and meet Kind’s dame. Tell her how helpful Kind is to squirrels. She smiled. We hug. She visit because Biggens hold ceremony mark shortest day of winter. Is strange what Biggens do sometimes. She give gifts to Kind, mate, and pup. She give gift to Pinecone and Friend. Butternuts covered dried honey for Pinecone. She share with others. Sweet and tasty. Friend’s gift strange. Covering like some Biggens use over fur, like I speak when we bring news of Biggen Elders’ new rules. This covering, long, narrow, red color. Use covering to wrap around neck, keep warm in cold weather. Ends work like Biggen viewer, clings to fur so no trip over ends. Biggen viewer capture Friend wearing covering. I show.”

Teacher’s face was replaced with a still shot of Aldin wearing a red scarf, holding a candied butternut in his forepaws, and smiling for the camera.

“Is strange what some Biggens do,” his Great Grandpup and her mate both commented.

Teacher's face reappeared. He flicked his tail up and down once in the affirmative. "Agreed, is strange. Friend speak he will wear red thing if winter when he go to speak to Biggens. I ask him why. He speak it make Kind's Dame happy. He speak sometimes, must do strange things to make Biggens happy, keep peace."

"Friend wise Elder Voice. Try make Biggens happy. Biggens help squirrels good trade if must wear strange cover thing make Biggens happy. We must go, Great Grandsire."

"Take care."

"And you, Great Grandsire."

THREE

"Hello Enhray," Aldin greeted the martin in English over the viewer, wigwagging his tail in greeting.

"Greetings, Am-bahs-ah-der 'Tree Rat'," the martin toothy smiled back at him in English.

Aldin switched back to Common. "That was pretty good, Enhrey and as you know, you're the only individual I would tolerate that from. How's family and work?"

"I just received a promotion. Phyllis is doing well, so are the kids. And you?"

"I'm doing well, Enhray. Pinecone is pregnant. She's expecting four pups mid-winter."

"Congratulations, Aldin." Enhray shoulders then sagged.

"What's wrong, Enhray?"

"I'm still coming to terms that cousin squirrels are sentient like us. It means I'm a murderer."

Aldin sighchittered. "We've been over this before, Enhray. You were a child. Neither you nor your father knew cousin squirrels were sentient. Considering how quickly cousin squirrels grow and die, there's probably no one who would remember the incident if you tried to seek them out in that forest to ask forgiveness. Look, if it will help, I'll ask our local squirrel Elder, that's the local cousin squirrel's closest thing to a governing body, to listen to you. You can ask her for forgiveness."

"Really?"

"Yes, but it will have to wait for another day."

“Very well. Thank you, Aldin. Where do we start today on our lessons between Ing-lish and Common?”

“How about, I teach you an English cuss word and its context, then you do one in Common for me?”

Enhray raised an eyebrow. “Why cuss words, Aldin?”

Aldin scuffed a paw. “You do not truly master a new language until you can understand slang and cuss words in it. I hear them, but I do not understand them nor can I seem to remember them when spoken to, at, or near me. And if I’m asking you to teach me those, it’s only fair I offer to do likewise in return.”

Enhray nodded. “Alright, so what Ing-lish cuss word do you wish to start with?”

“Shit,” Aldin stated.

Enhray tried it a few times. “And what does it mean?”

“Scat. It is a minor cuss word/insult in English. For example, telling someone they’re as worthless as a piece of shit.”

Enhray laughed at that. “Yes, I can see how that can be insulting.” He tried it a few more times, finishing in English with, “You pee-is of shit!”

Both of them broke down in laughter over it, knowing he didn’t really mean it.

“So, what Common cuss word you want to learn more about?”

“Let’s start with one or more of those you uttered at me in your jail cell...”

Teacher wigwagged his tail in greeting when his great grandpup answered the call. She did likewise.

“Is good to see you, Great Grandsire.”

“Is always good to see you, Great Grandpup. Squirrels here very busy last three” he held up three claws in case she didn’t remember the word he taught her before, “days. Our Elder, Tassel, fear we become too dependent on Biggen squirrel Kind. She hold meeting of squirrels out in forest away from Kind, mate, and their pup to speak. We accept Kind’s help as no squirrel here has enough food to last to spring. But most have some saved food. Tassel suggest that squirrels gather most saved food and bring to Kind’s nest and add to midden storage here. Squirrels ask

how we do that. It take long time during harvest to gather food while avoiding owl. Friend, Pinecone, and I show them how use Biggen backpack tool.”

“Backpack useful tool. Carry much food, less trips.”

“Yes, Great Grandpup. Squirrels agree do what Tassel suggest. She wise Elder, helps squirrels make right choose. No order them. Using backpacks still take three days to gather most food and bring here. We fill one of Kind’s empty midden hollows full. We find four more squirrels owl no kill eat. They scared, cold, alone, near out of food. Tassel and I speak to squirrels and explain how we live with Biggen Kind for rest of winter. They agree join us. Better risk trust Biggens than starve, freeze die. Is good. They now no starve, no freeze. While squirrels gather food bring to Kind’s nest, Tassel suggest squirrels leave some behind in middens in their territories. Prepare should late snowstorm come after squirrels go back to their territories in spring.”

“Tassel wise Elder.”

Tassel poked her muzzle in over Teacher’s shoulder. “So is Teacher.” She nuzzled him. “You tell Great Grandpup yet?”

Teacher nuzzled Tassel back. “No. I speak next. Great Grandpup, Tassel choose me.”

His great grandpup smiled wigwagging her tail in delight. “As you speak last time, Great Grandsire. May you and Tassel have many pups and see many winters together.”

“We need to go, Great Grandpup. Kind needs viewer for Biggen things.”

FOUR

“Hello?” Butternut stared at the screen a moment and blinked in disbelief at the obviously pregnant grey furred squirrel on her flatpanel. “Pinecone?”

Pinecone tapped away at the bottom edge of her flatpanel and the blind readers spoke her words. “Hello Butternut. I have not forgotten what we discussed the day after Twig died after Elder Teacher spoke to the two of us about Aldin.” Pinecone drooped her tail. “Things didn’t exactly turn out as planned. I don’t need to repeat what Aldin and I reported to you and the rest of Parliament.”

“It’s alright, Pinecone.”

“No, it’s not.” Pinecone typed away as she shook her head in the negative. “We had an agreement, and I’ve broken it. I feel like I stole him from you. I didn’t think I would be welcomed back in my home forest. I figured when we completed Parliament’s assignment, we’d return and together convince Raoul to a ‘foursome’.”

“No one expected the situation you faced at home, Pinecone. If you had arrived just a couple weeks later...” Butternut trailed off shuddering.

Pinecone also shuddered. “Yes, just a couple more weeks and there would have been no one left, except a very hungry owl. Which is why this forest needs more squirrels. As I was welcomed back, it is why Aldin and I have settled here and are doing our part.” She patted her tummy while drooping her tail. “I’m still willing to share him with you as we agreed.” She drooped her tail again. “That’s provided I can convince him to a long-distance relationship between two different mates.”

“Pinecone, no. Don’t try to talk him into it. It needs to be his choice. Thank you for offering to share him. It’s just not meant to be. May your pups all be healthy when they are born.”

“Thank you, Butternut.” Pinecone hesitated a moment. “If you change your mind, I have some suggestions that would help you win him over if you’re interested...”

FIVE

“Great Grandsire Teacher, is good to see you again.” The forest Elder wigwagged her tail in greeting at the squirrel on the Biggen viewer hanging on the wall in her old nest hollow.

Teacher smiled on the flatpanel wigwagging his tail in greeting to his great grandpup.

“I worry,” she said. “Try call yesterday. You no answer.”

“We have big snowstorm. Snow four days. Is why I no answer. Flat tools on our tree top snow covered. Can no make energy for flatpanel if snow covered. We uncover this morning. Snow deep as Biggen squirrel Kind stand-up on back legs and Biggen mate Sunshine stand on Kind’s shoulders.”

His great grandpup chittered in surprise as her eyes grew wide. “You sleep through most of snowstorm?”

Teacher wigwagged his tail left to right once in the negative. “No sleep much. We keep very warm in Kind’s next. Plenty food. No need sleep through storm. Squirrels here warn me winters colder, longer with more snow than your forest, Great Grandpup. I no believe before. Now I believe. When snowstorms come, spend much time in Biggen nest. Much time talk, speak stories. Friend speaks how his people live and share territory. Live in forest like squirrels and live in colony like Biggens. Colony have central meeting place. Place where all gather when danger or big storm. All work together at harvest time, gather and share food. No fight over territory. Always truce as share territory with all. All help each other.

“Squirrels here speak of things he speak. Many squirrels speak we already spend near half winter like Friend’s people. We already share food after bring most food from all squirrel middens to here. Biggen squirrel Kind’s big nest like meeting place in colony. Elder Tassel let all decide

together by show of tails like Elder council. All choose in spring, we try live like Friend's people. Though we become small Biggens, we still live in forest. We can tend forest. Forest no die. All live, squirrels, small Biggens, and Biggens in peace, truce, no fight.

"Biggen squirrel Kind also listen to Friend and watch vote. He offer his nest for meeting place. Kind, mate, and pup ask join colony with us. Squirrels agree let Biggens join colony. Is as Pinecone speak in past. They more like big squirrels than Biggen squirrels. They become big small Biggens." He giggled at the remark and she did likewise.

"Friend speak many things about his people. They have Elder Council like in your forest. Here, if they had council, no one remembers. All old Elders killed, eaten by owl." He drooped his tail. "Squirrels here decide by show of tails to form Council for our colony. Tassel head Elder. Squirrels choose Pinecone, Kind, and I for Elder Council for our colony. Choose Friend Voice of Colony to Biggen Elders like he Voice for his people he can no contact. Friend can Biggenspeak. Easy choose Friend for Voice. Friend agree to be Voice."

"Big changes, Great Grandsire Teacher. How you feel on changes?"

He glanced to his left and right and replied in a near whisper. "I both scared and excited. Is different. Hope good different. We see. After hear Friend speak of his people, I still think Friend's people are squirrels who flee fire long ago."

She nodded. "But you no find his people when you go around world speak Elder Biggen rules."

Teacher drooped his tail. "No, we no find his people."

His great grandpup changed subjects. "Has squirrel arrived yet from our forest? He raised by small Biggen Elder Butternut."

Teacher flicked his tail up and down once in the affirmative. "Biggen Elder Butternut's grandpup no grandpup arrive just before storm with other squirrel. He no choose name yet. He say mate died. He no say how."

His great grandpup drooped her tail. "They argue fight about Biggens. She chase him out of nest and through trees. Predator bird drop out of sky and hunt/kill her. Snatch her in claws, fly away. He flee straight to me. I comfort him best I can. I explain about your forest. He choose to go. I call Biggens. Small Biggen Elder Butternut come get him. He cry into her shoulder as she comfort him like dame to pup. Elder Butternut make good dame. We speak briefly. She agree to help raise pups who lose dame and sire like in past if need. She only agree if she raise them in Biggen territory. We decide those she raise will go to your forest, Great Grandsire."

"Is good. We need more squirrels. With Butternut grandpup no grandpup, and other squirrel, we now have four tens" he held-up all ten claws four times, "squirrels. Other squirrel arrive with Butternut's grandpup have tassels like us, fur black as dark hollow except chest. Chest white. I no see squirrel with black fur before. Two females, littermates, from other forests eye him and Butternut's grandpup. I think they both have mates soon. Elder Tassel decide when

Pinecone/Friend's pups born will be late enough for all others then try make pups. Wait until then, pups won't come until spring."

"Is already late enough here to make pups, Great Grandsire." She patted her tummy. "I growing pups. Mate is happy. He speak he no sire pups for three winters. He very proud sire."

Teacher smiled. "I happy for you and mate."

She bowed in thanks.

"One more news to report, Great Grandpup. Our Elder Council rule all squirrels here learn Elder things."

Her eyes widened in surprise.

"Tassel speak is important all know Elder things. She no prepared be Elder when she become Elder. She no want that happen to others here if owls hunt us again."

His great grandpup shuddered remembering what happened.

"Elder Council take vote. I no vote. Others agree with Tassel. I start teaching others Elder things. I live up to name I take."

"You do live up to name, Teacher, Great Grandsire. I must inform our Council of this."

"I understand. Is why I tell you, Great Grandpup."

"Give my blessing to Great Granddame Tassel, Great Grandsire. We speak again in seven days."

"She happy you honor her as Great Granddame."

SIX

Teacher smiled on the flatpanel wigwagging his tail in greeting to his great grandpup.

"We see big snowstorm again. Snow three days. Snow deep like last storm. Wind move snow around. Snow now half up Kind's nest tree. I show you in past how big Kind's nest tree is."

Teacher's great grandpup chattered in amazement.

"Again, all stay in Kind's nest through storm. I teach some of Elder things to others. Also, much talk about how long one lives. When I with Biggen healer I learn Biggens live long time. Great Grandpup, some see seven tens," he held up all ten claws and repeated six more times rapidly to show what he meant, "winters."

His great grandpup's eyes grew big a moment and she shook her head in disbelief. "Make-up story. Can no be true."

"Is true," Teacher responded adamantly. "Biggen raccoon Curios see over three tens winters. Small Biggen Elder Butternut see same. You next see her, you ask. Is true. Biggens grow slow. Kind and Sunshine each see three tens winters this winter. Kind and Sunshine's pup, Energy, see one and ten winters like me. He still pup for five more winters."

"Is hard believe."

"Yes, is hard believe. Is true. I no lie, Great Grandpup. Biggens grow slow, live long. Friend speak more about his people. His grandsire see four tens winters. Now we choose live like Friend's people in colony, if live in colony good for squirrels, maybe we see more winters."

"Biggens heal you, Great Grandsire Teacher. You see more winters thanks to Biggens. Is good. You like sire to me. It hurt much when Biggen squirrel no chitterspeak name take you away last summer. I feared I no see you again. I no ready lose you."

"And you like pup to me, Great Grandpup. May we both see many more winters."

She flicked her tail up and down once in the affirmative.

"Next time Biggen squirrel no chitterspeak name visit ask him to choose name in chitterspeak like Kind, his mate, and their pup did. Their Biggen names have no meaning chitterspeak. Pinecone give them names. They take names given to them."

"Teacher, wise Elder. I will ask." She nodded. "What else Friend speak about his people."

"Only how long they live. He speak more on their Biggens. They have only two Biggens his world. One tall as bears, little fur like those in Biggen origin story. Is why I think his people are squirrels who flee fire in story. Other like rabbits mixed with large cats. Size Biggen rabbit with cat claws/sharp teeth. Hunt/kill other Biggens and squirrels. Both Biggens smart. Know many things. Use many tools. He speak bad rabbits make his people smart squirrels. His grandsire one of those first made smart about four tens winters ago. Bad rabbits force his people dig tunnels or kill/eat them. They escape from bad rabbits, flee deep in forest, make friends with some of tall, little fur Biggens. Together they fight bad rabbits. Stop bad rabbits from hunt/kill." Teacher shook his head. "Is hard understand and explain, Great Grandpup."

"Sound strange, Great Grandsire."

Teacher wigwagged his tail up and down once in the affirmative. "What he speak make me now believe this no his world. Am glad this no his world. Biggens they friends with very dangerous. Have many, many dangerous, scary tools. One scary tool can burn whole world like in story," he paused a moment, wigwagging his tail nervously and lowered his voice. "And poison dirt, water, and air at same time. Kill/burn/poison all, no thing live if tool used. No safe even if hide in burrow like woodchuck. Why need tool that kill all? Why they make this tool I no understand. I

no want such Biggens come here. Friend speak if he knew how speak his people, they would flee here to our world from both Biggens.”

His great grandpup shuddered at the thought of a tool that kill/burn/poison all. “Yes, is very scary. I no want Friend’s world Biggens come here.”

“I must go. Take care, Great Grandpup.”

“You take care, Great Grandsire.”

SEVEN

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

“Enhray, 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.”

Enhray hesitated a moment. “Why do you call me Elder?”

“You once served in Parliament, the ‘Biggen Council of Elders, Enhray” 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.”

Enhray nodded. "I don't deserve that title."

Tassel chittered again. "Very well," Jessophat translated. She glanced at Jessophat briefly as she continued to chitter. "Kind, that's my chitterspeak name, when we address Enhray, use his biggen name we can no speak. What is it you wish to discuss with us, Enhray?"

Enhray looked down a moment. "Did Aldin tell you anything about my conversation with him?"

Jessophat paused briefly listening to Tassel. He chittered back. She chittered some more and Jessophat then spoke to Enhray. "Friend is Aldin's chitterspeak name, Enhray," 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.”

EIGHT

“Hello?” Butternut answered in Common. She stared at the screen in surprise and switched to chitterspeak. “Grandpup?” She wigwagged her tail in greeting.

Her adopted grandpup wigwagged his tail in greeting. “Granddame Butternut! This Biggen tool works!” he exclaimed excitedly. “Elder Pinecone teach me. I careful on time. I know sun six pawspands higher in sky your territory than here. I happy to see you.”

Butternut smiled at her adopted Grandpup on the screen. “I happy to see you too, Grandpup. Are things good for you in new forest?”

“It different, Granddame. Good different. I learn. I like. Many here take name. Others suggest name to me. I take name, Nimble.” He whirled his tail proudly.

“Is good name, Nimble. You always fast on paws as pup.”

He paused a moment. “I learn new chitterspeak word from small Biggen, Friend, explain is like what you do for me. You adopt,” he struggled a little with the word, “me like own grandpup. He teach me other chitterspeak word say you would like hear it. Thank you, Granddame Butternut. If no for you, I no live now. If no for you, I no have new chance after I lose last two,” he held up two claws, “mates.”

Butternut puffed-up in pride at what she heard. “I proud of you, Nimble. You ***ARE*** my grandpup though I no bare your sire. You always be my grandpup.”

Nimble puffed up a bit on screen at the praise and whirled his tail happily. “I busy since come to new forest, Granddame. Squirrel different forest come at same time. Biggen healer raise him. Healer no know how teach him be squirrel. I adopt other squirrel like littermate, teach him how to be squirrel. He take name, Shadow.” Nimble glanced off screen. “No be afraid, Shadow, come see my Granddame.”

A black furred squirrel with tasseled ears hesitantly pokes into view of the camera. He nervously wigwags his tail.

“You no reason be afraid, Grandpup Shadow,” Butternut said encouragingly. She gazed at him through the screen.

“You call me grandpup?” He asked nervously.

Butternut wigwagged her tail up and down once in the affirmative. “I adopt Nimble when pup raise him to adult. He adopt you as littermate. Makes you my grandpup, Shadow. I proud call you my grandpup. “I like your black fur. Is striking.”

Shadow’s eyes seem to light-up before he hide his face behind his tail bashfully at the praise.

“See, I told you, Granddame Butternut nice.”

Shadow tried the new chitterspeak word Nimble used before. “Thank you, Granddame. I lose sire and dame as young pup. Forest far, far away. Teacher show me world on viewer.” Shadow

drooped his tail. "Old forest other side of world. Nimble help me later, call Biggen healer. I thank healer save my life."

Butternut nodded. "Biggen healer will like hear that."

"Granddame, we call give you names we take. And call give other news." He chittered off screen and two more squirrels with peppery grey fur and rounded ears appear in view of the camera. They looked exactly alike, as they gazed nervously at the image. "These two littermates different forest, come here like us. They no choose names yet. They choose us. We share, all four mates."

Butternut smiled and whirled her tail happily at the news. "Welcome to our family, grandpups. As I speak before to Shadow, you mates my grandpups, make you my grandpups. May you see many winters, raise many healthy pups."

Both the females bowed in thanks. One spoke. "I scared when Nimble say he call small Biggen Elder." She wigwagged her tail nervously. "I see I no need be scared. You nice small Biggen."

"You have small Biggens in your forest. You have Biggens in your forest. Why you afraid? I live far, far away near Nimble's old territory. Call me Granddame. Call me Butternut. No call me Elder. I no Elder now. Biggens different. Many, many Biggens. We take turns serve on Elder Council. Only serve one," she held-up one claw, "time for two," she held-up two claws, "seasons. I serve last summer through harvest time."

The female flicked her tail up and down once in understanding. "Granddame Butternut kind give us blessing."

The other female spoke up. "May I ask Granddame Butternut how old you are?"

Butternut gigglechittered. "Some Biggens no like speak how old one is. No feel bad. You no know. I adopt you as family. I answer. Biggens grow slow, live long time. I born Biggen squirrel. Was Biggen pup ten and six," she held-up all ten claws followed by six more claws, "winters. I adult Biggen for ten more winters. Accident happen. Other Biggens no understand accident. Accident change me from Biggen to smart squirrel." She paused a moment. "I very, very scared after change. I flee mate to forest. I meet your Elder Teacher. He teach me how live like squirrel. I live there help raise squirrels no dame, no sire, like I do for Nimble for six winters. I return to Biggens and mate last spring. Mate take me back though I flee from him. He no look for other mate while I live in forest." She paused again for a moment. "I speak all this as no easy answer question, Grandpup. Do I count time as both Biggen and smart squirrel or just time as smart squirrel? If both, I see three tens and three winters." She held all ten claws up three times followed by three claws. "If no count Biggen squirrel time, I see seven," she held up seven claws. "winters. Biggens can see seven tens winters. Will I see that many now I no Biggen?" She shrugged. "Only creator know."

"May you see many more winters, Granddame," Nimble responded for the group. "We must go."

"Take care all of you," Butternut replied before ending the call.

NINE

Teacher wigwagged his tail in greeting when his great grandpup answered the call. She did likewise.

“Is good to see you, Great Grandsire Teacher.”

“Is good to see you, Great Grandpup. I very, very tired today. No speak long.”

She wigwagged her tail in concern. “You sick?”

Teacher gigglechittered. “I no sick. I tired. Pinecone bare four pups six days ago. Friend proud sire. Pups all strong, healthy.”

“Is good. Forest needs more squirrels.”

Teacher wigwagged his tail up and down once in the affirmative. “Yes, is good. Forest always needs more squirrels. After pups born, all other squirrels know can now try make pups. Pups no come until spring. I tired after I chase Tassel through trees, try make pups. Chase her again, try make pups, and again and again, last five days. Other males do same with mates. All tired.”

“And?”

Teacher wigwagged his tail a few times and puffed-up on screen. “Tassel speak at sunrise. Pups grow in her. I see ten and one winters and I sire pups again.” He smiled.

“Is good, Great Grandsire.”

“Yes, is good. Remember Grandpup of Butternut?”

She flicked her tail up and down once in the affirmative.

“He show he very fast climber. Others suggest name, Nimble. He take name. Squirrel with black fur who arrive with him take name Shadow. The two female squirrels who eye them, they littermates. They choose both as mates.”

“Which one choose Nimble and which Shadow, Great Grandsire?”

He shook his head. “They no choose one over other. They choose/share both. Both Nimble and Shadow agree share. Shadow was very scared when first arrive. He raised by Biggen healer. Was like big pup when arrive. Nimble help him grow up. They agree be like littermates become mates to both females. Females no choose names yet. They share mates, all four. No fight. I hear such thing once long ago your forest before I elder. A squirrel lost her mate. Littermate and her mate take her in and she join them. Littermate’s mate then sire pups with both littermates.”

“What Elder Tassel speak on this?”

“She call Elder Council together and Friend. We speak on it. Learn some Biggens do same. Butternut and Curious try to get Friend join them as mate. Learn some Friend’s people do same. Friend say their head Elder once share mate with four other females. She no grow pups for that mate. I think I tired. I no know how that male keep up with five mates! After we speak on this, we allow. They no pups. They adults. If they choose share mates and no fight, why should we forbid? Forest needs more squirrels.”

“Elder council wise. Forest always needs more squirrels. I must go, Great Grandsire. Give Great Granddame Tassel my blessings.”

The forest Elder wigwagged her tail in greeting to her Great Grandsire on the Biggen viewer.

“Is good to see you, Great Grandpup. I see pups grow in you now.”

She patted her abdomen which was starting to show a bulge. “Pups will come ten and five to two tens more days, Great Grandsire. I feel five growing in me. They move about a lot.”

Teacher wigwagged his tail proudly. “Is good.” He then sighchittered drooping his tail. “I can no speak long, Great Grandpup. Friend need viewer soon. Martin try hunt/kill squirrels here yesterday.”

She chittered in concern, wigwagging her tail sideways. She knew that martins were scary predators who could climb up in the trees to hunt squirrels. You had to outrun a martin to live.

“Martin just miss one squirrel. Squirrel send out warning cry as it flee. Martin follow/chase squirrel. Kind respond to warning cry. Block martin from other squirrel. He fight martin. Martin almost big as Kind. Martin fight/hurt Kind. Kind fight/kill martin. Kind with Biggen healer. He live. Sunshine and Energy at healer nest with Kind. As I speak before, I can no speak long to keep viewer ready for Friend. He need viewer speak to Biggens sent from Biggen Elders. They come soon, search for other martins. Biggen Elders keep promise, help squirrels.”

“Is good. Take care, Great Grandsire.”

TEN

“Hello?” Butternut answered in Common. She stared at the screen in surprise and switched to chitterspeak. “Grandpup?” She wigwagged her tail in greeting.

One of the females who had chosen Nimble as one of her mates bowed on screen. “Granddame Butternut. Littermate and I take names. I Lily, she Buttercup. Buttercup grow pups.” Lily drooped her tail. “I no grow pups.”

“Give my blessings to your littermate and your mates, Grandpup Lily. Why you no grow pups?”

Tears started to roll from her eyes. “Both Nimble and Shadow try make pups with me and Buttercup many times over,” she held up five claws, “days. Pups no take in me. Buttercup speak pups grow in her. Nimble and Shadow worry. Speak to Elder Voice Friend. Friend take me, and Nimble to Biggen healer. Shadow stay with Buttercup. Healer biggen woodchuck, both kind and scary. Healer no chitterspeak. Friend speak to and for us. Healer make me sleepy. He look in me where pups would grow as I sleep. When I awake he tell me I can no grow pups ever. He can no heal.”

Now a few tears fell from Butternut’s eyes. “Oh, Lily, I so sorry. If I there, I comfort you like you my pup.”

“Elder Teacher suggest I call, speak to you. He say you know how I feel.”

Butternut raised an eyebrow briefly. “Has Nimble told you about my mate, Grandpup?”

Lily wigwagged her tail left to right once in the negative while she sniffled.

“As I speak to you and other grandpups before. I born Biggen squirrel. Accident happen change me to smart squirrel and I flee mate to forest. When I return to Biggens, he take me back as mate. He is a Biggen raccoon.”

Lily’s eyes widened. “Squirrel and raccoon can no make pups!”

“No, we can no make pups, Grandpup. We try though we know we can no make pups. Biggens choose mates for reasons other than make/grow pups. Is why I help raise squirrel pups who lose dame and sire.”

They looked at each other in silence a moment before Butternut continued. “You can do the same, Lily. You can help Buttercup with her pups when they come. You can help others too.”

“How, Granddame?”

“Start with Elder Pinecone and Elder Voice Friend. Ask help them when pups come. You can no nurse pups. You can help keep pups warm when Pinecone need go eat or make bad water. She bare pups in past. She can teach you how to help.”

“Granddame Butternut wise. Elder Pinecone bare four pups. Keep her and Friend very busy. I will ask to help them.” Lily paused a moment and struggled with the next two words, “Thank you, Granddame. I think that words Nimble use last call. I go now.”

“You and the others take care, Grandpup Lily.”

ELEVEN

Teacher stared at the Biggen raccoon’s image on screen.

“Curious? Why you call?”

Raoul did his best imitation of a gigglechitter. “Squirrel Elder, mate your great grandpup try call you. Call me instead. I help. I leave, he come on.”

His image was replaced by Elder to sunset, his great grandpup’s mate. He looked at the viewer nervously, wigwagging his tail side to side.

“Is good to see you, mate of great grandpup, forest Elder.”

The other squirrel grabbed his tail briefly trying to calm his fear. “Is good to see you, old Elder Teacher.” He looked down in embarrassment a moment. “I touch wrong symbol with claw. Call Biggen when try call you. Biggen raccoon who make squirrels sleep answer. I scared. He try to no scare me. He speak good chitterspeak for Biggen raccoon. Help me call you. My mate bare,” he held up five claws, “five?” he hesitated at the word, trying to remember it. Teacher nodded and he continued. “Five healthy pups at sunrise. She ask I call, tell you. She show me how use Biggen viewer tool before when we call you last.”

Teacher smiled. “Is good. Forest needs more squirrels. I happy for you both.”

“I tell mate you happy. She tired resting with pups now. Elder Teacher know with pups take much time, energy. She can no call you again for many, many days.”

Elder Teacher drooped his tail. “I understand. Will be busy here soon when mate and all other females bare pups.”

“This Biggen tool useful. Let me see wise old Elder who far, far away. I still scared of tool.”

“Is good you scared, Elder. As warn before, good tool and dangerous tool. Press wrong symbol learn Biggen things. It can teach you hear Biggenspeak if choose. You then become small Biggen like those in my new forest.”

His great grandpup’s mate wigwagged his tail nervously. “Other squirrels might chase me away then.”

“If happen, you and mate come here, join us. Is no all bad.”

“No, no all bad. You live. You have mate. You still live in/tend forest.”

Teacher wigwagged his tail up and down once in the affirmative.

“I go back to mate and pups now, Elder Teacher. Bring mate food. How I end call?”

“I can end call from here. You and Great Grandpup take care.”

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.

"Ambassador, 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, Saniel, 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 Ambassador 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.

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

“Next question Ambassador.” Josine asked, “What is the name of the colony you now serve as Ambassador 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 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.”

THIRTEEN

“Hello?” A tasseled ear citizen squirrel with tawny brown mixed in with salt pepper gray fur blinked at the screen a moment and then smiled. She glanced over her shoulder, “Orlan! Aldin’s on the flatpanel. Come!”

Her mate, who lacked tassels and looked more like Aldin than her joined her. “Hello Aldin!”

“Hello both of you, Aouphril and Orlan, my two oldest friends. Parliament will be taking a two-day break starting tomorrow. Would you mind if I drop by for a visit as I’m only a couple clicks² away?”

“Of course, you may drop by, Aldin,” Aouphil responded. “You’re welcome anytime, though we may not be here much. The new pizza business is keeping us very busy. We’ve had to hire others to help.”

“That’s wonderful! I’m glad it’s working out for you. I hear business is booming for your cousin too. If you’d rather I not stop by so you can rest in your free...”

Orlan cut him off. “Don’t you dare back out after offering to stop by. We’ll make time for you.”

“Very well, I’ll be by tomorrow. I’ll drop by the pizza shop first if you like.”

“That’s probably best,” Aourphril responded.

“Oh, and congratulations, Aourphril.”

She looked surprised at him. “On what?”

Aldin stared at her a moment cocking his head one way and then the other a moment. “Squirrels don’t carry body fat that way. I doubt citizen squirrels are any different in that aspect. You’re pregnant.”

“You can see that?” Orlan responded.

² Klick-hour

“No one else has noticed yet,” Aourphril replied holding both her hands to her abdomen. “We’ve kept it quiet for now. I’m due in the fall. Unlike cousin squirrels, our pups take longer to be born.”

Aldin wigwagged his tail left to right slowly a few times. “For some it can be a touchy, private subject...”

“We took your suggestion, Aldin,” Orlan stated.

“I was scared at first after growing out my claws. But we learned together how to climb. You remember Giguere? He taught us how to climb. I quickly gained confidence. When we were ready, Orlan chased me through the trees like we were cousin squirrels. It apparently worked.”

Aldin smiled and nodded. “Alright, I’ll see you two tomorrow say, lunch time at the shop. Talk to you later.”

Aldin was sitting on a cushion that elevated him enough to be more on his hosts’ level at the table. A pan of pizza topped with pinenuts, ‘mushrooms,’ and sausage-like vegetable-based protein wheels sat in the center of the table. His two hosts sat across from him. To him, Aourphril was clearly starting to show she was pregnant. Of course, maybe he had a better eye for it as his mate had been pregnant recently, never mind nearly all the other females in the colony. They all nibbled on slices of pizza enjoying each other’s company. Fortunately, it wasn’t too busy in the shop at mid-day and their helpers took care of the incoming orders. They explained the shop was usually very busy at supper time. They had also expanded into sandwiches locals were used to eating.

Aldin glanced around and then asked quietly. “How many are you expecting? I know citizens usually have just one at a time, but you’re showing too much too soon.”

“You have a sharp eye, Aldin. I’m expecting twins.”

“Your suggestion may have worked too well,” Orlan added with a gigglechitter.

“Congratulations again. May they be strong and healthy.” Aldin nibbled a little more and then sighed. “I hope Parliament wraps-up its face-to-face business quickly this session so I can get home to Pinecone and the pups.”

“Sometimes, I’m jealous of cousin squirrels,” Aourphril replied.

“Oh?”

“Forty-five days versus five months³.”

Aldin nodded.

“Do you have names for them yet?”

“Back on Terra, we would name them when their eyes opened. Pinecone and I did likewise. However, the Colony is doing things a little different. As most of the cousin squirrels that make up the Colony chose their own names, they’ve decided that pup names are temporary. When they become adults, they may change them if they wish.”

Aldin pulled his flatpanel off his back and displayed a picture of his mate and their young pups. Both Aourphril and Orlan awed over them. Three had pepper-gray fur on their backs with white chest fur like their parents. Two of those three had a thin light brown stripe between their white chests and pepper-gray fur like their father. One of those two had light brown fur mixed in their muzzle just like their father. The fourth pup was all white. His brown eyes showed he wasn’t a true albino.

“The names we’ve chosen for now are,” he pointed to the white one first, “Cloud, in honor of my father, who also was a non-albino white squirrel.” He pointed to the pepper-gray one with no brown fur, “Twig, in honor of Pinecone’s first mate.” He pointed to the one with brown stripes, but gray muzzle, “Blossom.” And the remaining one that looked very much like him, “Chatter. He has been the most vocal of the bunch so far, so we thought that was a fitting name for him. Three boys and one girl. More specifically, boy, boy, girl, and boy.” Aldin whirled his tail proudly.

“You’ve changed quite a bit from last summer, my friend,” Aourphril stated.

“And I think for the better,” Orlan added.

Aourphril nodded. “You seem more confident. Maybe having a loving mate,” she snuggled up to Orlan, “is just what you needed. I just wish your ‘Colony’ was closer by.”

Aldin nodded. “Perhaps.” He then drooped his tail. “And, yes, I wish it was closer to here too.” He fell silent a moment. “Also, part of me feels guilty in some ways.”

“Oh?”

Aldin fiddled briefly with the napkin next to his plate while looking down. “Butternut,” he uttered and paused again before continuing. “She tried so hard to win me over before Pinecone came into the picture.”

“Have you spoken to her recently?”

³ New Earth months are 35 days long, split into five weeks of seven days. A day is about an hour/klick longer than on our Earth (Terra). The New Earth year has 10 months.

“Not yet, I’m having dinner with her and Raoul this evening. I’m not sure how well that is going to go.” Aldin shrugged.

Aourphril drooped her tail and they all were silent for a bit while nibbling on more pizza.

“Do you have a place to stay tonight? Our door is always open to you, you know, Aldin,” Orlan offered.

“I may take you up on that. Thank you.”

FOURTEEN

Teacher wigwagged his tail in greeting when his great grandpup answered the call. She did likewise. He smiled widely.

“Is good to see you, Great Grandsire Teacher.”

“And you, Great Grandpup. Tassel is tending to our pups. They grow quick.”

“Is same here. My mate tending to our pups. They healthy and strong.”

“Is good. I glad you answer. I have news to speak. No good news. News must speak to Elders. Must be wary of Biggens.” Teacher’s tail wigwagged back and forth in warning.

“I always wary of Biggens. Only trust Biggen squirrel with no chitterspeak name who take you to healer and give me viewer, Small Biggen Elder Butternut, and her mate, Biggen Raccoon Curious. I no see no chitterspeak Biggen squirrel lately. So, no choose name for him.”

Teacher nodded. “Is good. Trust no others unless they call out to speak to you in chitterspeak: ‘Butternut send me.’ Is very important. If they no call out ‘Butternut send me,’ touch this symbol on viewer and then flee!” A purple symbol appeared in the bottom left corner of the viewer. “If touch symbol, it will tell Biggen Elders bad Biggen in your forest. They send help.”

His great grandpup chattered nervously. “I will speak to other Elders. Why must they speak ‘Butternut send me’?”

“So you know they Biggen you can trust. Remember before pups born, I speak about martin attack colony? And Biggen Elders send other Biggens to search forest, help us? Biggens found empty trap. Trap big enough for martin. Let some in colony sniff trap. Trap smell of martin. Biggens say martin brought here in trap. A Biggen bring martin here to hunt us!” Teacher’s tail wigwagged back and forth rapidly. “Biggen Elders mad a Biggen disobey new rules. Biggen Elders ask I no speak about this until now. They no know who Biggen is. They try hunt for Biggen who do this. They no find Biggen. They fear Biggen try hurt squirrels in other forests.” Teacher drooped his tail. “No all Elders other forests accept Biggen Viewer. I can no warn all other Elders. I warn those I can. Take care, Great Grandpup.”

“You too, Great Grandsire Teacher.”

FIFTEEN

Aldin, Raoul, and Butternut made small talk about the colony during the meal. Aldin learned that Nimble was keeping in touch with Butternut, which was good. They inquired on the health of Pinecone and their pups. He showed pictures of them and provided their names. He thanked Butternut for directing Nimble’s mate, Lily, to assist them with their pups, especially since he couldn’t always be there thanks to his work as Ambassador. Throughout the conversation, Aldin could easily read Butternut’s body language. He drooped his tail realizing he was the cause of her distress.

“I’m sorry, Butternut,” he uttered.

“For what?”

“I can see I’m making you uncomfortable. Teacher explained to me how you and Pinecone had an agreement in regard to me.”

“Agreement?” Raoul asked as Butternut drooped her tail.

Aldin turned to Raoul. “Remember our conversation with Elder Teacher after Twig’s death, Raoul? He was concerned about Butternut and Pinecone fighting over me. He spoke to the two of them. They came to an agreement. Part of it was that both would stop trying to win me over unless I showed interest first. And part of it was that if one won me over, they would work together to get me to show interest in the other. At that point they planned to work as a team to convince you we should become a quad pairing much like your adopted grandpups, Nimble, Shadow, Lily, and Buttercup.”

Raoul glanced over at his mate, who nodded.

“It’s true,” Butternut responded while drooping her tail again. “The plan had been for them to return here after they finished their assignment. I knew they would be mates before the end of the assignment. You don’t sleep together for several months and not get use to each other’s scent. You don’t know how hard it was my first year in the forest preserve to resist Teacher when he tried to win me over after sharing his territory and nest with me, teaching me how to survive as a cousin squirrel.”

“Add to that Twig naming Aldin his successor. How could I compete against that? Of course, things didn’t turn out as planned. Who could foresee she would be welcomed back among her people after being banished as she had been? Pinecone called me after she and Aldin became mates. She offered to keep her end of the bargain despite those changes.” Butternut hugged Raoul and then looked him straight in the eyes. “I told her not to tell Aldin about our agreement. I would only try to win him over, if he shows interest first as I said to him after our agreement.”

Aldin relaxed a bit. Raoul suddenly burst out laughing. They both stared at him. It took him a few ceklicks⁴ to get the laughter under control. “Aldin,” he finally managed, “I’m not really sure why I’m laughing at all this. In some ways I’m not surprised that Pinecone and my mate made an agreement like that. And now, I think part of me would be up for it.”

“What?”

“I admit, I have been hesitant to have you join us as a third member, Aldin. Maybe it’s jealousy in that I’d fear Butternut would eventually leave me for you as you can give her children and I can’t?” He shrugged. “Which is silly if you think about it. If she were going to leave me over that, she and Teacher would have become mates that first year and she’d have never returned to me.

“I have supported her past attempts to win you over as I love her. And to be honest, I didn’t think she would succeed as you indicated time and again you weren’t ready to raise a family nor did you want to come between us. However, that’s obviously changed as you and Pinecone have four healthy pups. Also, it would bring Pinecone into it. You would be sharing her with me as I would be sharing Butternut with you. That would tamp down the unfounded fear I have that Butternut would leave me for you.” He sighed. “The problem is the distance. You two settled in Pinecone’s forest, not here. It wouldn’t be right for us to raise the pups without their biological father present. And I can’t relocate my college professorship to your colony.”

Aldin wigwagged his tail nervously. “Are you serious, Raoul?”

He nodded. “As I had said to Elder Teacher while he was at the hospital, Butternut wants pups and I can’t give them to her. Part of me expected Teacher to return here and try and court her again, as he had tried once before in the forest before he knew she was a ‘small Biggen.’ Obviously, that didn’t happen, of course.” He paused a moment then looked at him straight on. “If you’re willing to let Butternut to ‘try and win you over’ again, I won’t get in the way and I would accept you as my mate-brother. However, if she does win you over, Pinecone best be ready to spend time with me in return, even if it’s nothing more than ‘nesting’ together.”

Aldin looked back and forth between them like he was cornered by two hungry predators. This is not how he had expected things to turn out. He wanted to flee, but Raoul and Butternut were between him and the door. His tail nervously wigwagged back and forth giving away how he felt.

Butternut moved up next to him, unblocking a route to the door. “I can tell you’re not ready for such a commitment at this moment, Aldin. But I hope maybe in time, you’ll consider it. Perhaps you and Pinecone would allow us to visit for a while this summer after your kits are a little less of a pawful. I think the Terran phrase you said once was ‘Test the waters,’ so to speak, and see if we would work as a quad pairing.”

⁴ Ceklick-minute. There are 100 ceklicks in a klick

“I’m not ready for this,” was all Aldin could stammer as his tail continued to wigwag back and forth.

“I understand,” Butternut responded, while inching a little closer to him.

“Do you have somewhere to stay this evening?” Raoul asked. “You are welcome to stay with us tonight if you don’t.”

Aldin’s tail continued to wigwag nervously. “Actually, I…” he trailed off as Butternut gently nuzzled his neck disrupting his thoughts. She brushed one paw gently and slowly down his back. One of his rear paws started to thump as his tail froze, except for the very tip, which vibrated rapidly. She nuzzled his neck a second time. What resistance he had to the idea melted away. A small part of his mind realized Pinecone must have taught her his weakness to that move. If she encouraged him to chase her that moment, he knew he would be unable to resist.

“If you stay,” Raoul continued, “I’ll ‘chaperone’ and make sure she behaves, mostly.”

Butternut gently tugged him towards the hammock she and Raoul shared. He didn’t resist too much. He was able to get a quick message off to Aourphril and Orlan about his ‘change of plans’ for the night. As Raoul promised, Butternut behaved other than to nuzzle him a bit more before he fell asleep with her wedged between him and Raoul.

SIXTEEN

Pinecone’s flat panel vibrated. Fortunately, Lily had just dropped by giving her a break from the pups, making it possible for her to answer. Seeing Butternut on the screen, she started typing and the blind reader spoke for her. “Hello Butternut.”

Butternut wigwagged her tail in greeting. “Hello Pinecone. Apparently, Teacher spoke to Aldin.”

“I’m aware,” Pinecone replied. “Aldin called me yesterday and told me he learned about it from Teacher. He also talked about your dinner meeting. And he got me to confess that I suggested a few things to you.”

“Do you mind?”

“As I have tried to reassure you before, I’m willing to keep my end of our agreement, potential mate-sister. Aldin said Raoul is also willing.”

“Yes. He’s fine with it, provided he gets time with you should Aldin come around to the idea of a foursome.”

“You can tell Raoul I would welcome him as my second mate. He helped me so much early on.”

“I will do so. Thank you, potential mate-sister.”

“So, what are you up to with my first mate?”

Butternut scuffed a paw. “I nuzzled him on the left side of the neck exactly where you said to while gently brushing a paw down his back followed by a second nuzzle. He went from being totally against the idea to be very open about the potential of a foursome. From here, I’m working to get him use to having me near to him. With his permission, I’ve joined him in the Capital District to keep him company in the evenings and then snug-down with him each night.”

Pinecone nodded. “I see you’re taking my suggestion to heart. Good. I still feel like I stole him from you, Butternut. Hopefully, it will work.” Pinecone drooped her tail. “I need to go. Lily may start to wonder where I’m at. I can’t thank you enough for directing her to us to help with the pups. It’s so hard trying to do this alone with Aldin away doing what he must for the colony. I look forward to you and Raoul visiting this summer. Take care.”

SEVENTEEN

Aldin’s flatpanel vibrated. He rolled over in the hammock in the room he was using while Parliament was in session, careful not to disturb Butternut, who was still fast asleep. He reached for it to answer the incoming call. He smiled when he recognized Raoul. “Hello, potential future mate-brother. What’s up?”

“Is Butternut with you?” Raoul asked with concern in his voice.

Aldin quietly gigglechattered, changing the angle of the camera to show her curled on her side sleeping in the hammock. “She’s still asleep. I can wake her.”

Raoul visibly relaxed. “No need. I was just worried.”

Aldin’s tail started to wigwag. “Why?”

“Karle is down to the local precinct.”

“Karle?” Aldin paused a moment in thought. “Your skunk graduate student who is good with drones and just finished his degree. That Karle?”

Raoul nodded on screen. “After more than a year of investigation, the authorities have accused him with your attempted murder and for poaching.”

“They believe Karle was behind making that cousin squirrel deadly sick?”

“And hacking into the computers to alter the schedule and location of where you needed to be to hunt for the butternuts that I had asked you to cache and then return to retrieve them.”

“Spirit,” Aldin mumbled. He paused for a moment and added, “However, I don’t believe it.”

“Why?”

“Why would he helpfully bring in evidence of what he did after he and Giguere found Nimble’s first mate was dead. He’s the one who found the darts. If he was involved, wouldn’t he have done his best to hide those or at least make sure they weren’t found?”

Raoul nodded. “Makes sense, but we’ll have to let the justice system run its course.”

Aldin sighed. “I just hope they come to the correct decision this time, unlike the last case that involved me. Thank you for the update, Raoul.”

“I figured you’d like a heads-up before you get inundated with news reporters asking for comment.”

Aldin drooped his tail. “Thank you for the warning. By the way, if Butternut hasn’t told you yet, Pinecone is fine with you two coming out to the colony mid-summer to ‘test the waters’.”

Raoul smiled. “Wonderful.” He ended the call.

Aldin let Butternut sleep for another 25 ceclicks before nuzzling her awake. He passed the news onto her. They had a light breakfast in the room rather than go out. It was decided it would be best for her to lay low for the day.

The reporters didn’t quite swarm around him, thanks to a group of Parliament’s security guards, but they did shout questions at him. He ignored most of them, but then paused.

“All I have to say at this time is that if true, I’m deeply saddened and disappointed. Saddened that if the accused is responsible, his actions cost a life. One, which at the time was viewed as a dumb animal, but a life all the same. If he is guilty, I’m disappointed that I had trusted him. On the other paw, if he is not guilty, I hope his name is cleared and the true perpetrator or perpetrators are captured quickly.”

One of the reporters shouted back, “Some have seen former Representative Butternut coming and going from your room, Ambassador. Are you cheating on your mate?”

Aldin wigwagged his tail in agitation as he responded. “Pinecone is aware of what Dr. Butternut Gowandle is up to and has approved. Dr. Raoul Kaynobble, Butternut’s husband, is also aware, approves, and has encouraged Butternut to do so. The four of us might partner together as a foursome in the near future depending on how things work out between Butternut and me. Butternut has been courting me since before I met Pinecone. The attempt on my life by the accused, if he’s guilty, nearly succeeded. Butternut saved my life by donating blood to me. The least I can do in return is give her some attention and see what comes. I don’t need to remind you

that it is perfectly legal for citizens to have multiple mates. It is the same in ‘The Refuge’. No further questions.”

EIGHTEEN

“Hello Aldin,” Jessophat stated as he answered Aldin’s call.

Aldin wigwagged his tail in greeting. “Hello Jessophat. I’m calling to give a report on Parliament. They’ve tied-up a very important loose end in regard to cousin squirrels.” (drooptail) “That is, after yet another debate about me.”

“Good. I’ll set this to record so Teacher and Tassel may review it when they have time. Go ahead...”

The opossum serving as Chancellor hammered the group to order. He turned to Aldin. “We are aware you would like to get back to your mate and pups, Ambassador. We hope to wrap-up what you need to be present for in today’s session.”

Aldin nodded in thanks.

The Chancellor turned to the rest of the chamber. “When the Ambassador first arrived among us during the 805th Parliament, one of the things that Parliament established was a committee to look into the Ambassador’s claims of his origin. That committee has spent nearly two years in its investigation, which expanded after the two cousin squirrels who visited last session,” he glanced back briefly at Aldin, “and the resulting extra discussion about you.” The doors to the chamber opened. A beaver entered and began to make its way to the visitor’s circle. “The chair of that committee, Leona, is here to present their findings to date.”

Leona stepped into the visitors circle. “Thank you, Chancellor.” She turned to Aldin. “You, Ambassador, have been a puzzle for lack of a better way to put it, despite how much you have cooperated with us, that’s the general term of ‘us’ and not necessarily our committee. Whether or not you were aware of our work, as I said, you have been a puzzle for us.” She tapped her flatpanel. The room partially darkened as a large hologram appeared above her showing two DNA double-helices side by side with small differences highlighted. “You believe you are from another world. Yet, genetically, you are more than 99% Earth cousin squirrel. The only real difference is you have vocal cords like us, unlike other cousin squirrels. What are the chances that an alien from another world would have nearly the same exact genetic code as a species on our planet? And, be reproductively compatible with our cousin squirrels as you and your mate have recently proven. Congratulations, by the way, Ambassador.” She turned back towards Parliament walking in a slow circle so that she could face all of them over time. “And his ‘chitterspeak’ is the same or nearly the same as that of our cousin squirrels. How is that possible?”

She paused again before continuing. “Yet, he doesn’t have immunity to what we view as a common cold. One nearly killed him his first winter here. As he noted to the reporters outside this morning, he only survived thanks to a blood transfusion. How could that possibly be possible if he was an alien? Medically, only certain blood types are compatible with each other. Due to these circumstances, the committee can’t accept the alien from another world theory for the reasons I’ve just outlined. The idea he’s an alien with a compatible genetic code is just too slim. The odds of everyone in this chamber being struck by lightning, each separately within the coming week while sheltering indoors are much better than the odds that an alien from some other random planet would show-up, look just like one of our cousin animals, and can reproduce with them.”

“Which means he can’t be from a different world. Instead, he must be from this world. However, we know he isn’t one of our cousin squirrels. No others have vocal cords, except, former Representative Butternut Gowandle. So, a theory we investigated was that perhaps like former Representative Butternut Gowandle, the Ambassador was born a citizen squirrel, suffered a similar accident, and lived among cousin squirrels for several years and made-up the story he’s from another world when he decided to return. He would have had plenty of time in the forest wilderness to make-up ‘English’ as a different language to enhance the story and make it more believable.” The beaver paused a moment. “A search of citizen records turned-up nothing. No other citizen who suffered an accident like former Representative Gowandle’s. Nor did we find any who disappeared without being found, live or dead. And that theory doesn’t explain his appearance here where the citizen squirrel Aouphril was nearly crushed by a large rock when Aldin landed on the ground before her.”

Leona shook her head. “The committee can only conclude that maybe the Ambassador is from another time period, or perhaps a parallel universe as theorized by some in the 805th Parliament.” She sighed. “I know many hoped we could determine something more precise, but that’s where that stands.”

“I need to discuss the committee’s other research before delving further into those two theories. Last Parliament session, smart cousin squirrel Pinecone told her people’s origin story, which was confirmed and expanded on by the Elder, who chose the name Teacher after he spoke to Parliament. We think we might have a time frame for the great fire described in their origin tale.” There were hushed gasps in the chamber as Leona tapped a symbol on her flatpanel showing images of archeological excavations with the location listed at the bottom. Several of these were shown from different parts of the world. “Perhaps it’s coincidence that a research paper was in the works of being published when our two special visitors came here last summer. It is the result of more than five years of field research by professors at nearly a dozen universities across the planet. Apparently, our planet suffered some sort of cataclysm a mere 100,000 years or so ago resulting in a fire that burned most of if not all the landmasses of that time. Excavations around the world point to a burnt layer carbon dated to that time period.” The images on screen now show a very thin black layer in the various excavation zones.

Leona looked about the chamber. “Our history from prior to a few thousand years ago is lost. We’ve wondered where our missing link is and how we evolved to develop the society we have. The cousin squirrels’ origin tale fits in well with this discovery. What if what they speak of is

actually true? 100,000 years isn't a lot of time for a planet to recover from the sort of cataclysm that has been discovered to have occurred, at least not without help. Perhaps, they are our "missing link" and it's thanks to them replanting the forests after that cataclysm that our world exists as it does today."

Many of the representatives began to murmur among themselves. The opossum Chancellor only had to tap his gavel lightly once to get them to quiet down.

She glanced at the Chancellor and nodded in thanks. "I know, I'm just theorizing now on behalf of the committee. However, their tale explains so much. It also saddens me. They intentionally made themselves ignorant thinking it was the only way to protect our planet. I could see why they needed to do so at first. The resulting young forest would need a lot of attention and nurturing to thrive. But that task is over. I'm glad to see some are trying to leave ignorance behind." She turned to Aldin. "Embassador of 'The Refuge', please be sure those you represent understand our gratitude for what their ancestors did for all of us."

She turned back to Parliament again. "Back in the 805th Parliament the representative of Piccayune District, an astronomer, had theorized the Embassador was from our past based on the pattern of the stars in his world's sky compared to ours." She tapped an icon on her flatpanel and a hologram of the night sky appeared on the ceiling of the chamber, showing their night sky and a rendition of the same sky from 100,000 years ago. "That's not all that was different. Our scientists know there was more polar ice back then at both poles. Here is what they believe our land masses looked like back then." She called-up an image that looked similar to Terra, but with some differences such as a strait between North and South America. The Florida Peninsula was narrower. The Mediterranean Sea was landlocked.

She glanced at the Embassador as he stared at the image. "Does this look familiar to you, Embassador?"

Aldin drooped his tail. "It looks very similar to Terra. There are still some differences, but it's close, much as I confirmed about the alignment of the stars when that was last shown in this chamber."

"Again, it's a best guess, it may not be perfect. I know you don't want to believe you're from our past as it means everyone you knew is dead. However, it's as good a theory as we have right now. You could be from before the cataclysm, which would also fit in with what Elder Teacher explained to the last Parliament on how cousin squirrels once could speak 'Biggen' but lost the ability through selective breeding." Leona paused. "Or perhaps you're from a parallel Earth."

"Ms. Leona, as I said in the 805th, I believe the time travel theory is false. I am willing to accept the parallel universe theory over it."

"Why? Both are valid theories."

"Humans, Terra's 'biggens' as smart cousin squirrels would call them, have split-atom bombs." He paused. "I don't know a better word in Common."

Leona stared at him. “Humans have nuclear bombs?!” She shuddered as did others in the chamber.

“If that is the word for splitting atoms, yes. They had many, many nuclear bombs. If this is 100,000 years later on the same world, there wouldn’t be anything alive here. This planet wouldn’t have just burned across the surface. It would be a radioactive waste land as a result of that cataclysm, which would have been brought about by them dropping nuclear bombs on each other. Humans first split atoms 75 years ago and drop two bombs on one human country to end a world-wide war.” There were gasps throughout the chamber. “Though they have not used it since, they have enough of that kind of weapon to destroy the planet many times over.” Many in the chamber shuddered at the implication of what Aldin was saying. “Why? I have no idea why they feel they need so many such terrible weapons. As I warned the 805th Parliament, they seem to live to make war on one another.” Aldin drooped his tail. “As such, I can’t accept the time travel theory as I can’t picture any other way the planet could burn like that other than through nuclear destruction.”

“I still needed to present both theories, Ambassador. Thank you for understanding.” Leona turned back to the Chancellor. “Based on this information on humans provided by the Ambassador,” Leona shuddered again, “then perhaps the parallel Earth theory has more merit. That’s all I have to report. Any questions?”

A wolf raised his paw and was recognized. “Madame chair, do the geologists who discovered the burn layer have a theory as to what caused it?”

“Not yet.” She looked about. “Any other questions?”

No more paws were raised. She thanked Parliament for their time and departed the chamber.

NINETEEN

“After the presentation, Parliament took-up the unfinished business around cousin squirrels...”

“The Representative of the High Dessert District is recognized.”

The strange hodgepodge of fox, raccoon, and lemur bounded down to the Parliament floor.

“Fellow representatives. I think it’s time we take-up the ‘loose ends’ as the Ambassador has called it in regard to cousin squirrels. That way, he may return to his mate and pups. Anything after that we have questions on for him, can be conducted by video as past Parliaments have done. Technically, he should be on family leave right now.”

There was general agreement. She turned to Aldin. “Embassador, what is the ‘loose ends’ in regard to cousin squirrels you referred to in your opening remarks several days ago? What did our predecessors in the previous Parliament miss?”

“Thank you, Representative Josine,” Aldin replied. He tapped an icon on his flatpanel and the laws and rules the previous Parliament created in regard to cousin squirrels appeared on flatpanels across the chamber. “Members of Parliament, please take a moment to scroll through these laws and rules put forth by the previous Parliament.” He watched as Josine and the others did so and patiently waited. When she stopped scrolling and then looked at him again, he asked, “Do you see anything amiss?”

Most in the chamber remained silent and scrolled some more. Josine scrolled through again quickly and her eyes widened. “Cousin squirrels grow quicker than citizens as you reminded us at the beginning of this session. Yet, there is no mention of an age of majority in these laws and rules.”

“Exactly. As is, cousin squirrels would be treated exactly like citizens. They wouldn’t be viewed as having reached the age of majority until they are sixteen. Which would mean I’ve coupled with a child of five years of age. Of course, it would also make me a child as I’m nine, along with the eldest of the cousin squirrels among us, Teacher, who is eleven. As Representative Josine has pointed out, we mature and age faster than citizens. If left as is, it also means that no cousin squirrel would ever be able to petition for citizenship. Technically, I shouldn’t have been able to take the oath of citizenship if these rules had been in place at that time.”

“So, what age do you propose we recognize for cousin squirrel age of majority?” Josine asked.

Aldin shrugged. “I won’t simply propose that for your cousin squirrels. I’ll leave that up for you to debate once I present a few things. My and Pinecone’s current litter of pups will be mostly on their own by fall. They will be able to choose mates and reproduce by mid-winter. At what age does a citizen youth’s reproduction systems reach maturity?”

“Between eleven and twelve years.”

Aldin nodded. “Much like cousin squirrels reach the same maturity at eleven...sorry, I’m thinking Terran calendar again. You’d think after being here for two years, I’d finally get the difference. Cousin squirrels reach reproductive maturity between nine-and-half months and ten months/one year. So, a citizen reaches reproduction maturity at age eleven to twelve. Yet, the age of majority for citizens is sixteen and not twelve. Why?”

“It takes longer for the mind to mature.”

Aldin nodded. “That hasn’t been such an issue in the past for cousin squirrels as it has been more important to create the next generation so to speak. I’ve tried my best to have a paws-off approach with how ‘The Refuge’ has evolved. I’m trying to do the same here. Assuming cousin squirrels mature at the same pace, then age of majority would be just under one-and-a half years

of age. I would recommend you reach out to some cousin squirrel experts including Dr. Raoul Kaynobble and others to confirm.”

Josine nodded. “So, what is the age of majority among your people on Terra?”

“On Terra, our age of majority is two years. While we can reproduce at one, we’re encouraged to wait a year. We have a lot of education to cover in such a short period, including fighting skills as we have been at war with devilbunnies since before I was born...”

“They did contact Dr. Kaynobble and a few others to confirm what I said about cousin squirrels. After much discussion, Parliament has decided that cousin squirrels will be viewed as adults at two years of age for purposes such as conducting business with citizen creatures, should one seek to become a citizen, marriage if they choose to join with a citizen, and the age at which a citizen cousin would be eligible for the Lottery.” Aldin finished. “They don’t need me to be present for the rest of their session. I have a few things to wrap-up, but I should be able to head home tomorrow or the day after. If the Council decides I should stay longer, please get back to me as soon as you can. I’ll call again just prior to leaving the Capital District.”

Jessophat nodded. “Thank you. I will pass it onto the others.”

TWENTY

Teacher’s great grandpup wigwagged her tail in greeting when Teacher answered the call. He did likewise, smiling.

“Is good to see you, Great Grandsire Teacher,” she said.

“And you, Great Grandpup. How are the pups?”

“They do well, Great Grandsire. They keep mate and I busy. Will be summer soon. Pups will be more on own then.”

“Same here, all three keep us busy.” Teacher sighed. “I call to speak about bad Biggens. Biggen Elders think they catch bad Biggen who hunt/kill Nimble’s first mate. Biggen skunk who work for Curious. Nimble go speak to Biggen Elders. Friend help, speak biggenspeak to Elders for Nimble and chitterspeak back to Nimble from Elders. Nimble very scared but speak what must. Many others speak. Biggen Elders consider all speak to them. They decide Biggen skunk no Biggen who hunt/kill Nimble’s first mate. They continue hunt for bad Biggen.”

“When Nimble flee to me after predator bird hunt/kill second mate, he speak first mate die of sickness. Sickness make her hotter than rock sit all day in summer sun.”

“Biggen Elders say a bad Biggen make Nimble’s first mate sick. Biggen Elders think bad Biggen try hunt/kill Friend. But no want others know he try hunt/kill Friend. Is why he make Nimble’s first mate sick. She give sickness to Friend. Friend almost die from sickness. Biggen healer take blood from Butternut, give to Friend. Save Friend.”

His great grandpup’s eyes widened as she shuddered at the implications of what Teacher said.

“Biggen Elders think bad Biggen who try kill Friend also send martin here. Biggen Elders very angry. When they catch bad Biggen, they put bad Biggen in trap until die. We speak before, Biggens live long, long time. Like cornered animal, bad Biggen dangerous. Is why must be careful, be wary of Biggens. If no call out ‘Butternut send me!’ you must flee. Call Biggen Elders if can. Flee first! If you see Biggen skunk with Biggen squirrel with no chitterspeak name...”

“I give him name, Helpful, and he accept.”

“Good. If you see skunk with Helpful no need call Elder Biggens. He safe but no hear/speak chitterspeak. He now helping Elder Biggens try find bad Biggen. He angry he blamed for death of Nimble’s first mate.”

“I warn other Elders, Great Grandsire. I must go. Take care.”

“You too, Great Grandpup.”

FIN