

TWO

A peppery-gray squirrel with rounded ears wigwagged her tail in greeting as she answered the video call. She quickly tapped away and the flatpanel's blind reader read her text.

"Greetings from The Refuge. Jessophat and his family are away. I am Elder Pinecone. Who am I speaking to?"

A citizen squirrel with tawny brown fur and tasseled ears bowed to her. He wore a lanyard with a badge around his neck. "Greetings, Elder Pinecone. I am Constable Oakridge. As you can see on my location ID, I am calling from what had been the forest preserve north of Forestdale, Alisferil District." He drooped his tail. "It's not good here."

Pinecone drooped her tail. "We have been expecting your call, Constable. I will summon Elder Teacher."

The screen went dark for a couple of ceklicks¹. Teacher appeared on the viewer with Tassel and Pinecone by his side. He bowed in greeting to Oakridge

He chittered and Pinecone tapped away translating. "Greetings, Elder Oakridge." He pointed to Tassel with his tail. "This is The Refuge's Head Elder, Tassel, and my mate. Anything you need to discuss with me may be discussed with her and with Pinecone. I can hear biggenspeak, but I have no learned biggenspeak symbols like Pinecone. I no know how good your chitterspeak is, so I have asked Pinecone to translate as needed. We have been anticipating your call after Elder Voice Friend alerted us about the fire several days ago."

Oakridge bowed in understanding. "I understand and can speak chitterspeak, Elder Teacher," he responded in relatively good chitterspeak. He switched back to Common. "However, what I must report on must be stated in 'Biggenspeak' as it has more words and meaning as you are aware."

Teacher nodded. "How bad was the fire?"

Oakridge drooped his tail as he zoomed-out the camera on his flatpanel and slowly panned around showing charred remains in every direction. Little wisps of smoke still rose from some of the devastation. Teacher, Tassel, and Pinecone all gasped. Oakridge then called-up a map to show where he was in relation to The Refuge. "A large portion of the forest preserve north of Forestdale, Alisferil District has burned. I don't know if you understand our area measurements. A little over twenty square kamits of forest have been destroyed." The area affected became highlighted on the map.

All three gasped again as they understood. They wigwagged their tails in distress.

"Squirrel elders that forest refused gift of biggen viewer when I offered it to them."

¹ Ceklick-minute

“Yes, I was the ‘biggen’ who brought the flatpanel here so you could speak to them after you had completed your journey to all the forests on behalf of our Parliament.”

“Did any squirrels survive?”

“So far, we have found twelve adults and six pups. Amazingly, no serious injuries among them. Some singed fur, but that’s all. They are in my hovercraft. I have provided them with food and water. I have a medic with me to provide them with medical attention. As you can understand, they are quite scared and in shock over what has happened.” The view changed to a bouncing movement as Oakridge walks towards a hovercraft. As he got closer, Teacher and the others could see there were squirrels in the vehicle, several of which were hugging each other.

“I speak to the eldest survivor,” Teacher stated.

Oakridge nodded, crouched down, and chittered calling out for their elder. The squirrels within looked at each other and then they all looked to one among them with orangish-red fur and tasseled ears. It drooped its tail and then scampered forward.

“I eldest of those who live, Biggen who help us,” she replied.

“On viewer, Elder Teacher wish speak to Elder of those who live.”

The squirrel’s eyes widened briefly as she mumbled, “Elder of Elders.” She bowed and moved up closer to the flatpanel as Oakridge held it out for her. She nervously wigwagged her tail in greeting.

Teacher wigwagged in greeting in response. “I have no words for what you and the others have experienced.” Teacher shuddered.

“Was awful, Elder of Elders...”

Teacher wigwagged his tail left to right back and forth several times. “Where you learn that name? No call me that. Call me Elder or Teacher.”

“I hear our old elders call you Elder of Elders. Why you no like?”

“Is title for if/when our people unite like Biggens. We no united. Due to fire, I try unite those I can. Not all unite. I fail you and others who no take Biggen viewer. I no deserve title.”

“You good, wise elder. You no force squirrels do thing. You give choose.” She drooped her tail. “Elders start teach me elder things. Is one of first things I learn. Elders give choose. When you offer elders viewer and they no want it, I offer take viewer. I offer take risk that I might become small Biggen get chased away. I see viewer useful tool. They refuse.” She drooped her tail. “Our elders make wrong choose.” She sighchittered and wiped tears from her eyes before continuing. “Elder Teacher, I only see five winters. I no ready become Elder. Much I no learn yet.”

“You will make good Elder,” Teacher reassured the nervous young squirrel. “Speak what happen. How you and others survive fire?”

“Biggens come to forest,” she held up four claws, “days ago. First squirrel they see, they hunt/kill. Others call-out warning and flee. Biggens start fire and leave. Fire grow fast, eat/burn trees fast. Others try flee fire. Fire burn/eat them. Some remember in old biggen tale how squirrels hide in woodchuck burrows escape fire. They call out ‘hide in burrows!’ Most who live do same.

“Me? In panic fear I scurry down first burrow I find. Fire almost catch me.” She raised her tail into view of the camera to show some of the fur is singed. “I know mistake I make too late. Fire come on burrow fast. I can no choose other. Burrow I go in no burrow. Is fox den. I see fox. Fox see me. Was strange, Elder Teacher. I no scared no more. I grow calm. I accept what come and hope fox kill me quick. Fox in borrow as scared as me of fire. Fox no hunt me. Fox cower back from den opening as fire roar outside. It get so hot, I squeeze-up next to fox as far back in den as can go. Fox whimper and no hunt/kill me. Fox groom me like I pup,” she stared at Teacher. “I so scared and confused. Why fox no hunt/kill me? Why fox groom me like pup? I groom fox back as it whimpers again. I no know what else to do. Fox curl around me, it try protect me like I would my own pup. Fox groom me more. I grow more calm and fall asleep snuggled to fox. My last thought as I fall asleep is maybe fox hunt/kill me as I sleep. Fox merciful if hunt/kill me as I sleep. I no feel pain when die if die in sleep. I surprise I wake. Fox no try hunt/kill me as I sleep! Fire over. I flee fox den. Fox no follow.”

“You very lucky.”

She flicked her tail up and down once in agreement.

“This biggen and others come here at sunrise. I recognize him. I remember he come speak to Elders a season after you visit us. I bring him to Elders. Elders no flee, no chase off biggen. So, I know he safe biggen, no like other biggens come start fire. He bring biggen viewer so you can speak to Elders. I listen as you speak to Elders and they name you Elder of Elders. Is how I know you Elder of Elders.”

“Biggens have names for all things, Elder,” Teacher explained. “This biggen’s name translate in Chitterspeak to Oakpointyhill.”

Oakridge cut in. “Some of the others in the hovercraft have given us a good description of those responsible for this, Elder Teacher. It is only a matter of time until we catch them.”

“Oakpointyhill?” she asked. “Our forest is gone. No trees to get food from. No place we can hide from predators. What happen to us now?”

“We take you in,” Tassel stated. “Things different here. Good different.”

The female elder looked back at the flatpanel. “Yes, old Elders tell us you need squirrels. Warn us is different. No one chose go then. Tell me Elder, how is your forest different?” Her tail raised in a curl briefly.

“When I come visit Elders last harvest time...” Teacher started.

“Yes,” the young Elder interrupted. “I remember. I brought you to Elders just as I brought Oakpointyhill to Elders.”

“There were two other squirrels with me,” Teacher continued as if he had not been interrupted. He pointed to Pinecone with his tail. “Pinecone and a small biggen called Friend.”

“Friend now my mate,” Pinecone added. “He good mate though away from home a lot. He serve us as Elder Voice to Biggens.”

“Friend’s people live in colony like biggens. Live near each other and share territory. Colony is in forest, like how squirrels live. Use biggen tools and still tend trees. Most squirrels this forest killed by night predator bird. Those who survive spend winter with biggen squirrel with territory in forest where other squirrels’ territory was. After Friend explain how his people live, surviving squirrels realize we living like his people already while stay with biggen squirrel. We choose live like Friend’s people, squirrels, small biggens, and biggens, one big territory. Always truce like when must flee from predator or share nest in winter storm, keep all warm. Biggen squirrel, his mate, and pup join us. If you choose come here, we will welcome you. Share territory. You no starve. Come winter, you no freeze.”

“I speak to others and ask.”

“See, I speak you make good Elder. Elders explain and ask. Never force others in choose.”

She perked up and then drooped her tail. “If they no choose go your forest, what then?”

“I speak my great grandpup and she take them in.”

She looked to him with confusion clearly written across her muzzle as she wigwagged her tail nervously.

“Pup of pup of pup. Friend teach us more chitterspeak. Great grandpup serve on elder council my old forest. Is like before in your forest. Each squirrel has own territory. I know she welcome those who no want come here.”

She flicked her tail up and down once understanding. “I return after speak to others.”

The camera panned back to Oakridge. “As I was saying we have a good description of those who did this, Elder Teacher. I have already sent out a warning to the other forests in the area where the cousin squirrels accepted a flatpanel. If those responsible for this show their muzzles there, we’ll know quickly and, hopefully, will be able to stop them before they do this again. We will

set-up live-catch traps for the other victims of this forest like the fox she spoke about and relocate them to other forests. I'm amazed she survived that fox encounter." He paused a moment glancing towards the hovercraft. "Well, that was quick."

The camera panned back around. "Elders Teacher, Tassel, and Pinecone, I explain to others how you live and how you offer us a new home and how they could also go to forest of your great grandpup." She struggled with the new word but was able to pronounce it. "By show of tails, all accept offer go your forest. All scared, but better than stay here and starve. They also fear they no have enough time before harvest to learn new territory on own."

"Is good," Teacher responded. "Oakpointyhill will bring you to Biggen colony in Biggen flyer. You will need to get into trap-no-trap for safety. Other biggens then bring you here in bigger Biggen flyer. Will be long journey. Though Biggen flyers fast, you will no arrive here until tomorrow or day after."

The female elder wigwagged her tail nervously. "What is trap-no-trap?"

"It Biggen tool something like dray with cover over opening. It will look like a trap to you. Inside it feel like trap as smell of biggens. Oakpointyhill show you how opening work. Keep you safe on journey here."

"Elder," Tassel chimed in. "Like Biggens we take names. As we share territory, is faster to speak to one another with names. Others in group may choose when they wish. You as their Elder, need choose name soon." She glanced to the others who raised their tails with her. "And we hope you will serve on our Council of Elders. We will speak to all in the Colony about that after you and the others arrive. Colony all vote together on that as you and yours just vote to join our Colony."

The female elder bowed her head. "I young. I no worthy serve Elder Council."

"I see five winters like you, Elder," Pinecone stated. "You will learn. Teacher good teacher, wise Elder."

"You have already shown you are a good Elder," Tassel tried to reassure her. "I suggest 'Lucky' as your name if you accept name."

"Lucky?" she repeated. "Why Lucky?" she raised her tail briefly in a curl.

Tassel gigglechittered. "You hide from fire in fox den and fox no kill/eat you. You live to speak tale. That make you lucky."

She thought about it a moment and then nodded. "Is good name. But I no take name. All with me lucky survive fire."

Pinecone thought for a moment. “You speak you think fox think you its pup.” Pinecone gazed at her through the viewer. “Your fur is almost the same color as a fox. Maybe that why fox think you its pup. I suggest name, Foxy, means fox-like.”

The new Elder thought about it for a moment and flicked her tail up and down once. “I like. Name fits me. I take name Foxy.”

The camera panned back to Oakridge. “It will probably be the day after tomorrow before they begin their journey to you. My crew are still searching for other survivors.”

Teacher nodded.

“I go with Oakpointyridge,” Elder Foxy stated. “Squirrels may fear biggens. I talk to others see if some will join other Biggens in search.”

“See, you wise Elder,” Teacher replied.

An otter in a business suit sat at a desk and looked at the camera. “This is Jerrico, WNN News. Our top story this hour remains the forest fire within the preserve north of Forestdale, Alisferil. After four days and thanks to the assistance of hundreds of volunteers, the fire is under control and will soon be completely out. More than twenty square kamits of forest were destroyed. A dozen citizens suffered injuries battling the blaze. It is not yet known how many cousin squirrels or other cousin animals perished in the blaze. We will bring you more on this developing story after the news summary...”