

THREE

The doors opened to the Parliament chamber and a cousin gray squirrel scampered in with purpose in his stride. Those in the chamber fell silent as the squirrel proceeded to the visitor's circle without challenge. If he had interrupted some proceeding, no one indicated it as he glared about the chamber.

"We've been expecting you, Ambassador, you have claimed the visitor's circle and are recognized," the opossum chancellor of the 809th Parliament session stated. "You have the floor."

Aldin's tail thrashed about behind him as he tried to contain his anger. "Thank you, Chancellor," he stated providing him a brief bow. He looked about. "Representatives of Earth's Parliament, if cousin squirrels had a united government like you, despite their peaceful ways, we would now be at war." He paused a moment to dead silence though several of the representatives showed shock on their muzzles. "Countless hundreds are dead or will perish as a result of this fire!" His tail thrashed about some more. "Imagine if someone attacked Forestdale or a similar size settlement, killing the first citizen they came upon and then set fire to the city! Now imagine somehow, they disabled the firefighting service and taken out communications while they're at it, giving the fire a good head start before help can arrive from elsewhere. Wouldn't you call that an act of war? If not, what would you call it?"

Several in the chamber gasped at the comparison. A few shouted outrages. Others agreed to the comparison. The chancellor pounded his gavel for silence before it could become out-of-hand.

"I am here in my official capacity as Ambassador for 'The Refuge'. I bear the following message from Council of Elders, particularly Elder Teacher. I have been instructed to translate and add to that message as necessary as Common is a more robust language than Chitterspeak." Aldin pulled his flatpanel off his back and tapped a couple icons. The lights in the chamber dimmed and the large flatpanel in the chamber showed Elder Teacher, flanked by Tassel and Pinecone.

Teacher chittered and Aldin translated.

"Biggen Elders," Aldin adds 'Parliament Representatives' to this. "Those I represent are outraged at the fire that has been set north of, Friend add the correct Biggen name here," Teacher pauses giving Aldin a chance to add, "Forest Preserve north of Forestdale, Alisferil." Teacher continues. "We thank the biggens who have come forward to risk their lives to fight the fire. We also thank you for the help you will give to those who survive the fire including relocating to a new home forest."

Teacher sighchitters before continuing. "Smart squirrels are no united like Biggens. We do no have one council of Elders for all forests." Teacher drooped his tail. "I now see we may need to unite. I did no want to invoke that which I may claim, Elder of Elders, as the eldest of the squirrels, making me like your head Elder." Aldin adds Chancellor to the end of that sentence. "Not all Elder councils in each forest have accepted a Biggen viewer. Those that have speak with me about this fire. We understand those who did this are no acting on behalf of all biggens. This

is why we give you warning now. Those Elders I speak to all agree on the following warning to all biggens:”

Teacher held up one claw. “One, until the biggens responsible for this attack on our people are captured and punished, no biggens will be welcome in our territory unless they first seek permission and explain why they must come to our territory. They will be provided a safe phrase to use. If they can no Chitterspeak, they must bring a biggen with them who can.”

Teacher held-up a second claw. “Two, should a biggen come into our territory who does not provide the safe phrase, they will be viewed as one of those who set this fire. They will be considered a threat and treated as such. Help will be called for. We will defend our families and territory. If possible, the intruders will be captured to turn over to biggen authorities. If they resist capture, they will be treated as any other threat to our people.” Teacher’s eyes narrowed. “They will be hunted.”

Many in the chamber gasped.

“We may be smaller than you biggens, but we can hunt when needed.” He glanced at Pinecone to his right. She nodded while wiping back a single tear. “Pinecone’s first mate, Twig, hunt/killed an owl as large as a biggen wolf. It cost him his life, but he saved biggen squirrel pup, Energy, from that owl.”

Teacher drooped his tail. “I wish it no come to this. What other choose do we have? May those who set this fire be captured and punished quickly. May we have friendly relations again in the near future, like those promised by the previous Biggen Elder Council session, where we can welcome biggens in our territory with no need for a safe phrase or the fear they will attack or hunt/kill us.”

The screen went dark. Aldin tapped an icon on his flatpanel bringing the lights back up and set the panel back on his backfur. The chamber remained silent.

Aldin looked about. “Representatives, the job of Ambassador isn’t always pleasant. My duty presenting this message is completed. Do you have any questions?”

Much to his surprise, those present remained silent. He looked about and saw many shocked expressions along with guilt. He then looked to the Chancellor, who was just as silent. “Chancellor and Parliament, as you have no questions for me, thank you for your time today. You know how to contact me if you need me. I surrender the circle. I have much work to do to help the survivors relocate to new forest homes.” He scampered rapidly towards the nearest exit. The chamber remained silent as he departed. He ignored the resulting uproar as the door closed behind him.

An otter in a business suit sat at a desk and looked to the camera. “This is Jerrico, WNN News. Our top story this hour remains the forest fire within the preserve north of Forestdale, Alisferil and its aftermath. Earlier today, Ambassador Aldin Bushyetail delivered a message to Parliament from The Refuge’s Elder, Teacher.” Jerrico pauses and the image changes to a recording of Aldin’s visit to Parliament including his noting how close they were to being at war, followed by a copy of the recording from Elder Teacher with Aldin’s translation. Jerrico comes back on screen. “Parliament has issued an emergency order that citizens without official business or permission to do so are to stay out of the forest preserves for their own safety until further notice. Meanwhile, the search for survivors in the remnants of the forest preserve continues. Sadly, more dead than survivors have been found. In other news...”