

SIX

In the morning, the newcomers were a bit nervous in the presence of Jessophat and his family, who had arrived home after their arrival the night before. Introductions were made including the standard sniff-over by the newcomers. Jessophat and Carulin provided plenty of butternuts and water for the new arrivals.

Jessophat bowed to Foxy and wigwagged his tail in greeting. "Elder Foxy, you and others are welcome to my nest and The Refuge. Other squirrels will be here soon. They show your people around and help them settle into their new home. My nest tree serves as a meeting place and safe refuge. The Elder Council have chosen a few other trees like this one to be made into additional safe refuges. There will be some biggens working on those trees for the next two tens," he paused a moment and held-up all ten claws twice, "days. They will no bother you."

As he finished, and before she could respond other squirrels arrived, introduced themselves and explained they would each take a family of squirrels or small group and show them around and help them pick a tree hollow. Each had a few of that year's season-old pups in tow, eager to help the newcomers build summer dreys. Though many felt a bit overwhelmed, they allowed themselves to be led-off with a nod from Foxy.

"Is true, always truce?" She asked Jessophat.

"Yes, always truce. Is what we chose as a group, Elder Foxy" Tassel responded as she entered the room. "We spend all winter here in Kind's nest in truce. We realize would make no sense to go back to old way after live together all winter in truce."

Both sniffed each other briefly.

"Will be hard."

"You and your people have lived in truce since biggens come look for you after fire."

Foxy flicked her tail up and down once in agreement. "I settle many fights near sunset each day after search all day for survivors. I so tired each night."

"Was like that here first ten," she paused a moment holding-up all ten claws, "days as we got used to being all together. In time they will get used to it."

Foxy flicked her tail up and down once. "I hope so. It was so hard search all day for survivors..." She trailed off and teared-up as the stress of the past few days suddenly overwhelmed her. Carulin came up to her and immediately embraced her. Foxy stiffened at first in surprise, but quickly melted in the large squirrel's embrace and began to bawl.

Carulin chattered reassuringly as she rocked back and forth while the cousin squirrel bawled.

"So many die..." Foxy stammered between gasps as she cried.

“There, there. For just a little while, pretend I your dame and you pup. You safe in my embrace. Cry all you want. You brave did what must.”

The larger squirrel continued to chitter reassuringly to her that it would be alright. Carulin rocked back and forth while Foxy buried herself in the larger squirrel’s shoulder and bawled for roughly ten ceklicks. Foxy began to calm down and Carulin loosened her embrace.

Foxy looked up at her.

“You feel a little better?”

Foxy flicked her tail up and down once.

“Good. I have comforted others, Elder Foxy. Anytime you need a shoulder to cry on, come, pretend I your dame and cry.”

Foxy bowed briefly in thanks. “Would be easy to become pup forever. You no smell like other biggens. You smell more like other smart squirrels.”

Carulin smiled and bowed at the compliment.

Through this Tassel patiently waited and now spoke-up. “Come, I will show you to what I hope is a suitable tree for your new home.”

Outside, three pups joined them. They bowed to Elder Foxy and wigwagged their tails in greeting her. Tassel introduce them as Shell, Tansy, and Gray, her pups with Teacher. Tassel lead the small group through the forest a good distance from Jessophat’s tree. They passed Foxy’s adult pup from two seasons before and her family, who were busy building dreys with the help of other pups. Her adult pup leapt over and spoke briefly with them. She bowed to Elder Tassel.

“Elder Dame, trees so big here! Many are butternuts. Plenty food for all. I see why they always at truce. No need fight over territory.”

“Is good, my pup. Elder Tassel show me to tree I claim as own.”

“I know. No far from here. We be near each other. Is good.”

Tassel led her a little further on. The tree she showed Foxy was close enough to her adult pup and family that if there was no truce, they would be in the same territory. It was a huge butternut tree like many others in the portion of the forest she had seen. There was a hollow the right size for a squirrel family with room to store food for the winter. There was a babbling brook between her and her adult pup and family for water. Tassel’s pups quickly got to work building a drey for her. She simply let them go to it while she chatted with Tassel. Tassel explained some of the short history of The Refuge with Foxy up through how Jessophat had saved others from a pine

martin which had injured him. He had been at a local biggen healer the day before where he had received a clean bill of health. Foxy, in turn, explained what Elder things she had learned so far.

A pawspan of time quickly passed before the pups asked Foxy to come inspect the drey. She was impressed with their work and praised them, indicating she looked forward to using it. They then darted off back towards Jessophat's tree mentioning something about class, whatever that was.

"Come," Tassel stated. "Our Elder Council will be meeting shortly. You should be present."

"You no waste time."

"Bad biggens started that fire as you know. We no have time to waste."

They made their way back towards Jessophat's tree. The others were waiting for them on some of the branches outside of the tree. Not just the Elders. All the others, including all who had come with her from the old forest. Five and ten or so tens of squirrels all about her. Foxy wigwagged her tail nervously, especially, when she saw Teacher, Elder of Elders, up front with Pinecone and Jessophat. Tassel joined them. She looked about and chittered out to all gathered.

"The Squirrels of The Refuge," she paused a moment as she looked about and saw many tails flick-up and down once. "welcome our new members. Like us, you have suffered terribly. Us by predator and you by fire." She wiped a tear from her eye. "Do not feel like outsiders. You are part of our family, our people now."

Those in the trees cheered at the newcomers and offered their welcome. As it quieted down, Tassel spoke further. "Our ways are different. We are always at truce here. We work together to make our people stronger. You see this already as this year's season-old pups have eagerly helped you build your new summer dreys. We have a Council of Elders to decide important decisions. As the eldest of those who survived last harvest season and winter predator bird attacks, I am head Elder, Tassel" She introduced the other members. Some of the newcomers gasped in surprise as she introduced Jessophat as Elder Kind.

"Yes, we have a biggen on our Council. As you come to know Kind, you'll view him more as a big squirrel. When we chose to live in truce in what small biggen, Friend, calls a colony, Kind and his family asked to join. The others insisted he join our Elder Council. He added what had been his territory to ours. While we have some of the eldest among us on the council, not all have seen many winters. Teacher has seen one and ten." She held up all ten claws and then one more. "Kind has seen more than three tens." She paused a moment and held up all ten claws three times to more gasps among the newcomers. "Biggens grow slow, live long. His pup, Energy, see as many winters as Teacher. I see six. Pinecone, five."

"Our Council seeks input from the people." She paused, "All the people. Those who survive predator bird attacks. Those who come from other forests when we asked for more squirrels. Pups born this spring and those who survive the fire. All here are squirrels of The Refuge. Much as you chose us to serve. With our new members, we should have another member on our

Council. As you chose before, it's time to choose another. I am sure our new members would agree that it should be their Elder, Foxy. Do the rest of you agree?"

Every tail was raised in agreement, newcomers and old. Pups and adults. Foxy stared about and then bowed her head and leapt forward to join the other elders up front.

"Thank you, all," Tassel concluded. The gathering broke-up. Many came forward to congratulate Foxy before going on their way.

Foxy wasn't sure what to do next as Teacher came up to her. "Come, I teach class. You join."

"What is class?" Foxy held her tail in a curl.

"Class is gathering for learning. I teach Elder things to all who wish learn in class."

Foxy's eyes grew wide. "All?"

Teacher nodded. "Elder Council decide such last winter. If disaster strike again, want Eldest survivor prepared to lead. Unlike how it was for Tassel or you."

Foxy thought for a moment and flicked her tail up and down once in agreement. "You wise Elder."

Teacher wigwagged his tail sideways once in disagreement. "I no suggest. Tassel suggest. Others agree. I hesitate but do as others say. I see now Tassel wise beyond her winters."

Foxy spent the next pawspan of time on a tree branch with adults and pups as Teacher taught. Her adult pup, her mate, and their pups were among them. She learned he taught class every other day at mid-morning and taught until mid-day. She could easily understand what he taught. As many in the class were newcomers, he had others teach them new chitterspeak for one through ten. It was easier than having to use claws. She liked learning the new words.