

EIGHT

It had been a busy two weeks for Foxy. She hadn't had time to check-in on her adult pup and family until now. They wigwagged their tails in greeting and hugged.

"Pup," Foxy began.

"Dame Foxy," she interrupted. "I choose name, Birch."

Foxy smiled. "Wonderful. Birch, is good name. I remember your first harvest and winter how you brought birch bark into our shared nest and used it to make nut holder things." She moved her forepaws about pantomiming a basket-like structure. She paused a moment and continued. "I no understand why we no use names before. Is easier."

Birch nodded, but her tail lashed about. "I learn much in Teacher's class. I no happy old Elders keep so much secret from us."

Foxy flicked her tail up and down once in agreement. "Ten and four days now pass since we come here. I go around speak to others who survive fire yesterday. See how they feel about this forest. All still adjusting. They find it strange and different. Good different. All happy they come here. I check as Elder Teacher speak it no too late to change minds and go to other forest. All say they choose to stay here. We have much to learn. I think we will do well here."

Birch glanced to her mate who nodded. "We feel the same, Dame Foxy. We stay. Yes, is different, but good different. I agree, we will do well here."

"Granddame," one of Birch's pups spoke-up. He glanced at his siblings. "We no chose names yet, but we know what part will be." He paused as she gave him her full attention. "Foxy."

Foxy blinked in surprise.

"We go to class taught by Elder Voice Friend yesterday. He explain how his people live and is what squirrels here try to copy for The Refuge. Elder Voice Friend has two names. Friend and Bushytail." He wigwagged his tail for emphasis. "Second name he explain is family name. His grandsire first with name, Bushytail." He paused a moment. "When we choose names, we will use Foxy as family name to honor you, Granddame, who lead us to our new home."

All three of her grandpups group hugged her. She was moved to near tears. She glanced up at Birch who smiled back.

"I guess I am now Birch Foxy," she said to her mother with a slight gigglechitter.

"I missed class as I go around to others who survive fire yesterday as I speak," Foxy continued. "I miss Teacher's class day before as Elders Pinecone and Kind show me around our shared territory. Is big. Real big. Kind very generous to give his territory to The Refuge. We climb from tree to tree for nearly half-a-day to reach far end of what was his territory. From there was nearly

as long to get to end of forest Tassel and the others had claimed before the predator bird attacks. Kind used his viewer to bring a Biggen flyer to us so we would return before sunset.”

“Kind still scare me,” Birch said. “I no use to being near biggens. Was hard with biggen squirrel and beaver when I help search for survivors.”

“Kind like Elder Tassel and others speak, more like big squirrel than biggen. He climb as good as us. Use chitterspeak good. Is proud of how he tend forest in what was his territory. He say to me he prefer to be big smart squirrel.” She drooped her tail. “As we look over territory he speak that his littermates and dame are no happy he share territory with us. Is hard explain as biggens so different.”

Foxy paused a moment trying to think how to explain what she, herself barely understood. Her grandpups jumped in. “Elder Voice Friend explain one-way biggens different in class yesterday, Granddame. While they know more things than we do, no one biggen know everything. When they become adults, they choose something to know a lot about, like the healer who checked us over after the fire. They then trade what they know or do with other biggens. Those who grow or harvest food trade food with healer or for a biggen viewer. Kind and family harvest butternuts and trade those they no need for other biggen things.”

“Yes, that is what I was trying to find way to explain, my grandpups. You very smart to learn such so fast,” Foxy praised them. She turned to Birch and her mate. “Kind’s littermates and dame are normal biggens. They no understand why Kind choose be big smart squirrel over be biggen. They no understand why he choose share his territory and butternut harvest with us rather than trade with other biggens. He and Pinecone also worried about harvest as it will be first for The Refuge as shared truce territory. We will need to work hard to no only harvest enough for winter. We must make sure to have some to trade with biggens for things we no have but need, like more backpacks, or Biggen viewers for those who wish to learn Biggenspeak, or the work of hollowing out those trees without harming them that will be extra meeting places and middens. I told winters here long and cold. Last winter snow so deep it nearly to height of Kind’s nest tree entrance.”

The others chattered in appreciation to how much snow that was. Birch then gestured around with her tail and forepaws from the branch she was sitting on. “Look around, Dame Foxy. Many, many big, healthy butternut trees. There will be plenty food. We will work hard using biggen backpack tools to harvest them and store where told in Kind’s nest tree and the other trees being prepared as central meeting places in addition to our own middens. Kind, Pinecone, and other Elders no need worry. No one will starve and there will be plenty to trade with biggens. If all of Kind’s old territory is like this part it will take many, many mating seasons among us before we need to expand territory further to ensure enough food for all.”

Foxy nodded. “You wise beyond your winters, Birch.” She paused a moment in thought. “Speak of harvest as Kind and Tassel showed me the territory of The Refuge, I saw some cherry trees towards sunrise in what had been smart squirrel territory. Maybe a pawspand’s journey from here.”

“Cherries?” Birch asked, her tail wigwagging rapidly in excitement. “They have cherry trees here?”

“What are cherries?” her pups asked in near unison.

“You’ll find out shortly, my pups,” Birch replied. “Come, we go get some backpacks and we’ll go harvest cherries. We’ll show the Elders how many and quickly we can harvest them with backpacks. We show Elders they no need worry about butternut harvest come harvest time.”