

ONE

“Hello Enhray,” Aldin spoke in English.

“Hello Aldin,” the citizen martin responded in English with distress in his tone. “I am sorry, I must cancel our session. I was on my way out the door when your call came through.”

Aldin wigwagged his tail in concern. “What’s wrong?”

Enhray English became a bit broken-up as distress worked into his voice. “The forest preserve north of here is burning.”

“What?!?” Aldin’s tail whipped back and forth rapidly.

“It was a very dry winter and spring. City officials have put out a call for all able body citizens with any kind of firefighting training to lend a paw. I need to go.”

“Be careful, Enhray, remember you have a wife and kids who depend on you.”

“I will, Ambassador. But I don’t know when we may talk again.”

“I have two other students learning English. With your permission, I’ll share your contact information with them. Then you can practice with each other as you find time.”

“Deal, I need to go.” Enhray cut the connection before Aldin could say anything further.

An otter in a business suit sat at a desk and looked to the camera. “WNN news. This is Jerico reporting. Our top story this hour, the forest preserve north of Forestdale, Alisferil is burning.” Images of the inferno appear on the screen with various citizen species in firefighting gear trying to fight it. “We spoke to Constable Oakridge earlier today about the blaze.”

Image switches to a citizen squirrel with tawny brown fur and tasseled ears behind a podium. He has a lanyard with a badge around his neck. “At this point, the fire has burned over three square kamits¹ of forest and continues to spread rapidly. We need every able body citizen in the area with firefighting training out here to help fight this blaze.”

“Constable! What caused the blaze?”

Oakridge drooped his tail. “We have not determined the cause at this time. We haven’t had any storms in the area preceding the blaze. So, we have ruled out lightning as the cause. As such, I fear it to have been someone careless with a campfire, though a fire ban is in effect due to the dry conditions. Or,” he paused a brief moment, “it was intentionally set.”

¹ Kamit-kilometer. 100 hectares or 247 acres in a square kilometer.

There were gasps from the news corps. Arson was next to unheard of.

“This forest preserve was known to have a sizable cousin squirrel population. Do we know if they were able to escape the fire?”

“As you know most cousin squirrels fear us. Those fighting the blaze haven’t encountered any cousin squirrels so far. As such, I fear the worst. We won’t know for sure until we get this fire extinguished.”

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 ceklicks². 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?”

² Ceklick-minute

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.”

“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 giggled. “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...”

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...”

FOUR

(chitterchitchit) “Come out. Is safe.”

A squirrel with singed fur poked its muzzle out of a burrow hole. “I smell biggens. Is no safe!”

Foxy wigwagged her tail in reassurance. “They good biggens. Biggen Elders send them to help us. Our Elders were teaching me Elder things before fire.” She drooped her tail. “We no find Elders yet. Makes me Elder for now. Biggens have names for all things. Biggen squirrel name Oakpointyhill.”

“Strange name.”

She flicked her tail up and down once. “Biggens all have names. Most have no meaning in chitterspeak. Oakpointyhill speak chitterspeak good. He good biggen. Our Elders trust him before fire. He has food and water. Biggen rabbit with him no chitterspeak. Name no meaning in chitterspeak. She biggen healer. She look you over if you let her.”

The singed fur squirrel crept out of the hole and wigwagged his tail nervously over his head. “They no hunt/kill me?” He looked over her shoulder and could see the biggens a little way off.

“No, they safe. They no hunt/kill me. They no hunt/kill you.”

The singed, scared squirrel wigwagged his tail up and down once and then chittered back down the burrow. Two others nervously emerged. They too had singed fur, but not as bad as the first. They looked about in panic searching for some place to climb as they saw the two biggens behind her.

“Is alright,” Foxy assured them. “They good biggens.”

They wigwagged their tails nervously. “Our dames warn us no trust biggens. Trust biggens become like pups forever.”

“Sometime must risk trust biggens. Must risk be pup forever. Which you choose? Stay and starve/die or risk be pup forever but live. No hard choose.”

All three wigwagged their tails up and down once in agreement. Not a hard choice. Live or die. This new elder was wise.

All three slowly crept towards the two biggens, who slowly crouched down to let three scared cousin squirrels sniff them. All three whirled their tails over their backs nervously as they sniffed. The biggen squirrel gave them food and water. He chitterspoke for the healer who checked over them slowly and gently. She rubbed an ointment on their burns, which cooled them. It was as the new Elder said, they were good biggens.

As the biggen rabbit finished tending to their burns, the first to emerge from the burrow spoke for the three. "Elder what become of us? Forest gone. No place hide from predators. No trees to give us food. We starve if predators no hunt/kill us first."

She hugged each of them in reassurance like they were her pups. "Biggens will take us to other forest. You need choose which forest. Right now, they take you some place safe from predators. Is truce like winter nests. You no go thirsty. You no starve. I will explain when I rejoin you."

"You no come with us?"

"I help Biggens find other squirrels who survive fire. Would you have come out if only biggens here?"

They wigwagged their tails left to right and back in the negative.

"How long would you survive out here if I no come with biggens?"

The first answered, "A few days." All three drooped their tails. "Then die of thirst if no rain."

"If a predator no find hunt/kill us first," the second added.

"You good Elder come look for us," praised the third. He looked to the other two who raised their tails briefly. "We trust you. We will go with biggens to other squirrels and wait for you."

Foxy went through the same process again, and again. The Biggen viewer in the flyer that Oakpointyhill controlled showed a heat signature when they were near an occupied burrow. She would then coax the squirrels out and convince them to let the Biggens help them. There were also many, many charred bodies of squirrels and other animals. It distressed Foxy to see all the dead.

On the second day, Oakpointyhill's tool indicated there were five squirrels in the burrow in front of her. Again, as many times before, once the biggen flyer landed, she scampered up to the burrow and called out. (chitterchitchit) "Come out. Is safe."

A squirrel with singed fur poked its muzzle out of a burrow hole. "Biggens start fire. I smell biggens. Is no safe!" The female squirrel replied, then paused while staring at Foxy. She quickly leapt out of the burrow and nearly bowled her over in a hug. "DAME!!!" She cried out while shedding tears. "You live!"

“Pup!?!” Foxy exclaimed in reply shedding tears of her own as she hugged her adult pup from her litter two winters before.

Her adult pup flicked her tail up and down once. She chittered back down the hole and her mate and their three pups from that winter slowly emerged. “Is my dame!” Much hugging occurred.

“Biggens!” Her mate chattered when he spotted Oakridge and the rabbit healer near their hovercraft a little way behind Foxy. He darted back towards the burrow pushing their three pups ahead of him.

Foxy chattered loudly freezing him in his tracks. “I now Elder,” she said. “I no endanger family. They safe biggens. Biggen Elders send them to help squirrels. Biggen squirrel named Oakpointyhill. He have food and water. He chitterspeak good. Biggen rabbit with him healer. She no chitterspeak. Old Elders trust him. I trust him. You can trust him. Come.”

“Elder?” Her daughter asked.

Foxy drooped her tail. “Yes, we search for other survivors. We find Elder who start teach me Elder ways. She dead. We no find others. No other survivors see more than four winters to my five. Makes me Elder.”

Her daughter turned to her mate and pups. “Come. Elder dame speak biggens safe. We go to biggens.” Her mate did not argue.

It was as Foxy promised. They had all the food and water they needed as the rabbit healer gently checked each over.

“Oakpointyhill take you to Biggen place safe from predators where other squirrels wait. It truce there like in winter storms or when must flee from predator. When search done, we go to new forest.”

Her daughter chittered quietly to her mate. He flicked his tail up and down once and then hugged her. Their pups hugged their mother. She turned to Foxy. “Mate and pups go. I stay. I help find others.”

Foxy hugged her daughter. “You wise beyond your winters.” She turned to Oakridge who didn’t need an explanation as he was already placing a call for another search team that needed a cousin squirrel. Foxy’s daughter wasn’t the first to volunteer to help.

Foxy’s daughter nervously wigwagged her tail when the second flyer arrived with a biggen beaver pilot and biggen squirrel medic. Introductions where made and they were off to do as Foxy and Oakridge were doing.

FIVE

Twenty or so squirrels milled about in the strange biggen space. It was as the new Elder had said. The biggens provided them food and water. A biggen healer tended to those with burns. A biggen squirrel who chitterspeak good spoke to and for them. They were amazed by the biggen tool in the other room that washed away their bad water and pellets when they needed to make those. Over the next two days more squirrels arrived in ones and twos. Those who were there before helped the new arrivals. In total there were thirty-eight by late on that second day. Near sundown the new Elder returned with the biggen squirrel named Oakpointyhill. All the squirrels swarmed around her nearly overwhelming her.

“You find no others?”

Foxy dropped her tail. “We find no more squirrels alive today.” Tears fell from her eyes. “I see many dead, burned squirrels and other animals. Is awful. I recognize Elder who start teaching me Elder ways. She dead like all the others.”

They all drooped their tails and they all wept for lost loved ones, young and old. “I need rest. I and others who are helping Biggens search will try one more day tomorrow to find more squirrels.”

One of the late comers asked, “Elder, is it true that you will go to forest of Elder of Elders?”

Foxy flicked her tail up and down once. “He no like title Elder of Elders. He speak call him Elder or Teacher. I was part of the first group of survivors Oakpointyhill found. I speak to Elder Teacher on Biggen viewer. His forest is one who asked for more squirrels last winter. Is different there.” She described how they lived in a colony. “Those in the survivor group at that time by show of tails all choose to go to Elder Teacher’s forest.” She looked about. “The rest of you must choose so Biggens know where to take you. If you fear new different way Elder Teacher’s forest, his pup of pup of pup is Elder in his old forest. Is like here before fire. One thing different in Elder Teacher’s forest, all take names like Biggens. You who go there chose name when ready. I already take name. I am Foxy.” She told how she survived the fire as only those in the original group knew.

“Is good name,” many agree.

“I go where you go, Dame, Elder Foxy” her daughter declared. Her mate and pups agreed. The rest who were not part of her original group huddled together in small groups and spoke quietly among themselves. Then one by one, they declared that she was their Elder and they would go where she goes. She was moved by the gesture.

Oakridge chose this moment to speak-up. “Squirrels rest now. One more day we search as your Elder Foxy state. The morning after that you begin journey to your new home.”

The following day found another dozen survivors. Again, all chose to follow Foxy to The Refuge. The next morning after that, another cousin squirrel arrived with Oakridge. He immediately scampered over to Foxy and bowed before offering to allow her to sniff him. Her eyes widened as she finished.

“I remember you. Small biggen named Friend who come to speak to our Elders last harvest time.”

Aldin bowed again. “And you have come a long way from the nervous squirrel you were at that time, Elder Foxy. I am here to take you to your new home. Those who live in the colony call it ‘The Refuge’.”

Foxy thought of the name for a moment. “Fitting name for those here who have lost our home.”

“Gather your people together, Elder Foxy. We have a long trip ahead. I came to make that trip a little easier. You will no need to ride in what feels like a trap. As I can Biggenspeak, we will no need a biggen squirrel with us to translate. I know how to fly small biggen flyer. I will take us to larger biggen flyer. A biggen otter will fly us to near The Refuge. From there I will again fly us in a smaller flyer to your new home. It will take all day.”

True to his word, Aldin piloted, well programmed, the extra-large hovercraft from the emergency shelter for the fifty survivors to the flitterport. From there, an area had been closed-off from the public so the squirrels could scamper from the hovercraft and into the waiting flitter without encountering any other biggens. That is until they were on board and saw the biggen beaver. He crouched down so all could sniff him. A door opened and a biggen otter came out and like the beaver, she crouched down and let them sniff her. Aldin explained that their biggen names didn’t translate into chitterspeak. The beaver, Dauvid, would provide them food and water when asked. He understood, but could not speak chitterspeak.

After the otter went back into the pilot chamber, Dauvid showed the squirrels how to fasten the “trap-like” harness in the seats. Aldin explained how it was needed for safety as the flitter started and ended its flight, indicating the light that would turn on when they needed to strap on the harness. Many were amazed as they gazed out the windows at how high and fast they flew above the clouds. Dauvid was very helpful providing food and water as requested and showing the squirrels where to leave pellets or bad water. Those who used the flitter’s bathroom were now used to how the water suddenly whooshed through the trough to take their urine and feces away as it was similar to the one in the emergency shelter. It still amazed them. Aldin explained some about ‘The Refuge’ on the journey. Many took turns explaining how they survived the fire.

When they landed, they stared as Aldin hugged both the biggen beaver and otter like family. He explained to them it was a way biggens thanked each other or said goodbye. They all proceeded to do likewise, though all were quite scared doing so. Aldin led them into another large hovercraft and within a pawspan of time (roughly one klick³), they arrived at The Refuge. More introductions were made and the newcomers were ushered into Jessopha’s tree hollow and down

³ Klick-hour

into a space to rest for the night. The space smelled of other squirrels, so all felt safe and were quickly asleep after their long journey.

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 chittered 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 Jessopha 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 Jessopha'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 Jessopha'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 Jessopha. Tassel joined them. She looked about and chattered 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 Jessopha 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.

SEVEN

A citizen martin appeared on the large screen in Jesophat’s living space. Some of its facial fur looked singed. It looked straight at the camera and at the young citizen squirrel on his screen.

“Hello? Who’s calling?”

On screen, the young citizen squirrel bowed. “I am Saniel, son of Jessophat. I am calling you from ‘The Refuge’ as the local cousin squirrels are calling it. You are Mr. Ehnray, correct?”

The martin nodded. “‘The Refuge’? Ambassador Aldin Busheytail’s home?”

Saniel nodded as his tail flicked up and down once. “Unfortunately, he and my parents are away at the moment. Our newest Elder, Foxy, wishes to speak with you. I will translate as best I can. I had already explained to her roughly what we would say to each other up to this point.”

Foxy nervously creeps into view of the camera. Her tail swirls behind her back. It takes her a moment to compose herself. Saniel chitters reassuringly to her. He then turns to Ehnray. “I’m reassuring Elder Foxy that you are no threat to her and reminding her that she is the one who asked me to call you.” As he finishes, she starts chittering. He translates, “Use biggen Martin’s name I can no pronounce as you Biggenspeak for me, Energy.” Saniel adds, “Energy is my chitterspeak name, Mr. Ehnray.” He chitters back to Foxy, who continues.

“I new here. I and others who survive fire flee old burned forest to this one. I learn from other Elders here, Mr. Ehnray, you brave and go fight fire that destroy our old forest.”

“Yes, I fought the fire as many others did. Some were badly burned doing so. I was lucky to only burn a little fur. It was an awful thing.”

After Saniel translates Ehnray’s reply, Foxy chitters something else to Saniel. Saniel chitters back. They seem to sound nearly the same going back and forth until Saniel nods. Saniel turns back to Ehnray. “Foxy’s people have less chitterspeak than is used here in The Refuge, Mr. Ehnray. They are learning eagerly and quickly. She wanted to know the proper way to pronounce the chitterspeak word for ‘thank you.’. Among them, they would simply bow in acknowledgement.” He repeated it one last time in chitterspeak.

Foxy chattered ‘thank you’ while bowing, and continued chittering, pausing for Saniel to translate.

“Thank you, Mr. Ehnray, for risking your life to try and save our old forest. Pass my people’s thank you on to the other biggens who also fought the fire. May your healers help those injured to heal quickly.” Foxy bowed again briefly. “The other Elders here explained to me how as an older pup, your sire take you to our forest to learn to hunt. Obeying your sire, you hunt/killed and ate a squirrel. You and your sire no know we smart then.”

Ehnray closed his eyes briefly. “Yes, it is true. As an older pup, I hunted, killed, and ate a squirrel in your forest. I did not know squirrels were smart until Aldin’s arrival.”

Foxy paused a moment listening to the translation. She flicked her tail up and down once and chittered some more as Saniel translated. "Any debt you think you owe us for obeying your sire long ago is no more. As the surviving Elder of that forest, I forgive for what you did."

Ehnray's eyes widen briefly. He bowed his head as he tried to fight back tears. "Thank you, Elder Foxy," he finally managed. "That means a lot to me."

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 chittered 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."

NINE

There were six cherry trees in a cluster at about the distance Foxy estimated. It didn't take long for the pups to decide they loved cherries as they got their muzzles sticky from the sweet juice of the ripe bright yellow fruit. After they had their fill, they took a turn keeping an eye on the surrounding forest for danger as the adults worked to fill their backpacks. After a while, they grew bored.

"Dame, may we go play?"

"Keep within site of the cherry grove," Birch replied wigwagging her tail in warning. "There could be predators about."

"We promise!" They chittered in unison and began a game of tag/chase through the nearby trees, being careful to not stray too far from the cherry grove.

The lead pup suddenly skidded to a halt when she almost collided with another squirrel, nearly causing both of them to lose their grip on the branch. The pup panic-screed and fled back towards the cherry grove, her two siblings following closely behind her.

The stranger stared at the fleeing pups a moment in total surprise. "Pups, here?" he mumbled to himself. "Wait! I no bite!" He called after the fleeing pups. "Please stop!" He gave chase. Another squirrel quickly joined him.

“What is it?” the second male asked, keeping pace with the first.

“Squirrel pups, littermate.”

“Pups?! Here?”

The first flicked his tail up and down once. “They flee towards cherry grove.” He raised his voice again. “Please, pups, no flee! We no bite! I wish to speak!”

None of the three pups headed the calls behind them as they quickly made their way back to their parents and grandmother, chittering a warning cry. “Strangers come! Sunrise direction!” They quickly scurried over near the adults. Their father paused in his work and gathered them together protectively, putting himself between them and the newcomers.

Birch and Foxy paused in their work and looked to the east to see two adult squirrels on a branch of a nearby tree staring back at them. The newcomers looked similar to Pinecone and Tassel having peppery gray fur and rounded ears. The newcomers stared at the strange looking squirrels with orangish-red to reddish-brown fur and tasseled ears. They wigwagged their tails nervously. Finally, one of them chittered, “Is cherry grove still truce area?”

Foxy and the others physically relaxed. They flicked their tails up and down once in the affirmative. “Come,” she called out. “Plenty cherries for all. You no bite, we no bite. Is always truce here.”

The two newcomers cautiously worked their way over to the same cherry tree. They all sniffed each other briefly.

“We thought we last to survive,” the newcomer the pups had first seen stated. “One your pups nearly knock me off branch.

“Is good we no last squirrels,” the other added.

“Do you mean survive the predator bird attacks of last harvest time and winter?” Foxy asked.

The newcomers flicked their tails up and down once in the affirmative.

“That long story and no our story to speak,” Foxy replied. “We live with those who survive attack. We come to this forest after ours burned.” (drooptail) “No many survive fire. Was like in biggen origin story, fire hunt/eat all above ground. We only live as we flee into woodchuck burrows. I, Eldest of those who survive fire. I take name, Foxy. This my pup, Birch,” she pointed to Birch with her tail, “her mate and pups. They no take names yet.”

“Foxy will be part of our name when we choose names,” one of the pups said whirling his tail proudly.

The newcomers nervously wigwagged their tails. “Names? Like biggens?”

“As I speak before, is long story. Come, eat your fill. Then we go back to Elder Council. They explain better.”

The newcomers hungrily dug into the ripe fruit, though they nervously glanced at the others and the strange biggen tools they filled with cherries. The pups huddled together chittering quietly among themselves, all thought of further chase games forgotten. They nibbled on cherries now and then while keeping an eye out for possible predators. As their parents and grandmother finished filling their packs and strapped them on, the pups begged for attention, which was given to them.

“What is it, my pups?” Birch asked.

The first born among them, the female that nearly collided with one of the newcomers spoke for the three of them, a half-eaten cherry in her forepaws. “We have chosen names, Dame.” She scuffed a paw on the branch briefly. “Well, my littermates had already done so. They wait for me to choose one before we let you know.” She quickly finished the cherry. “I love these so much, it will be my name. I am Cherry Foxy.”

Birch hugged her. “Very well, Cherry it is.” She looked at the other two.

“I look much like Granddame Foxy,” the other female spoke. My fur is as red as hers, so I choose name Red Foxy.”

Birch hugged Red. “Is good name for you, Red,” she praised and then glanced at her son.

He scuffed a paw. “You choose my name for me already, Dame. Long before I could chatter, I was always first awake to nurse. You say I always bright eyes. I take name you give me, Brighteyes Foxy.” He whirled his tail proudly.

Birch hugged Brighteyes, praising his name. All three then looked to their father. He looked down briefly and then back up. “I no ready chose name yet,” he chattered.

All three of his pups group hugged him saying it was alright.

All through this, the two newcomers remained quiet and watchful. They didn’t say a word as they fell in behind the others and followed them towards what they knew had been biggen territory the previous year. They looked to each other briefly, but in that look they agreed they would follow these strangers even if they entered biggen territory. It was a risk, but better than being alone.

Word quickly spread as they arrived back among the others of The Refuge. Tassel and Pinecone quickly gathered to greet the newcomers. Teacher was busy teaching class. Nothing short of an emergency would interrupt his class time. Tassel's eyes widened as the newcomers approached. She cried out in joy as she leapt over to the newcomers and nearly barreled them over in a group embrace. She started nuzzling both of them.

"My pups!" she cried-out with joy. "I thought owl hunt/kill you!"

"Dame!" both cried out as they embraced Tassel. "Is good you live. We thought predator bird hunt/kill all others."

"We have much to speak, my pups." She glanced over towards Pinecone who came up next to her mother. "First, introductions. This your older littermate, Pinecone."

They sniffed each other. Pinecone embraced both of them happy to know she had surviving full siblings. "Older?" one of them asked.

"She born two," Tassel held-up two claws, "winters before you."

Their eyes widened. "The one the Elders banished?"

Tassel flicked her tail up and down once in the affirmative. "I, head Elder now and Pinecone no banished now. She serve on Elder Council. She friend of biggen squirrel whose territory this was. Is good she make biggen friend."

Pinecone and Tassel explained what happened. Foxy opened her backpack and shared cherries much to Tassel's and Pinecone's delight. Others brought out butternuts to share during the long tale. Tassel's younger adult pups were amazed at what had occurred and the truce rule throughout the forest.

"You warn us as pups never trust biggens or be pups forever."

Tassel nodded flicking her tail up and down once. "Yes, but sometimes, no real choose. If choose is trust biggen and risk be pup forever or starve/die, which is better choose?"

Her adult pups flicked their tails up and down once in the affirmative, understanding.

Tassel gestured around her with her tail. "We no become pups forever. Biggen squirrel more like big squirrel than Biggen. He live in trees like us. He gather food for winter and store in midden. Biggen's chitterspeak name is Kind. He, mate, and their pup join our colony and joined their territory with ours. They are away today doing Biggen things. You meet them later. Kind serve on Elder Council." Again, they stared at Tassel in surprise.

The two adult pups briefly explained how they survived by raiding all the middens of those they thought had died. It had been touch-and-go during some of the winter storms with just the two of

them to share body warmth. Another squirrel suddenly cried out in joy as it nearly barreled over one of the two newcomers as they finished their tale.

“Mate! You live!”

It only took him a brief moment to recognize her scent. “Mate?” he responded in surprise and embraced her in return, tears running down his cheeks as he nuzzled her neck.

The female disengaged from him and scuffed a paw on the branch and looked down briefly and drooped her tail. She glanced over towards a nearby branch where another squirrel perched, wigwagging his tail with hesitation. She waved the other over with her tail. “When predator bird die and Elder Tassel call us together to tell us, you no come. I thought bird hunt/kill you.”

The other squirrel cautiously approached. He and Tassel’s son sniffed each other nervously.

“First Mate, this is Beech Leaf, my second and current mate.” She wiped a tear from her eye with the back of her paw. “First Mate, I chose new mate when I thought you dead.”

“Maple Leaf speak fondly of you all winter, Maple’s First Mate. Is good to see you live. Maple and I raise litter of pups.” Beech drooped his tail. “I step aside. She your mate first. I no fight you for her.”

“No,” Tassel’s son replied wigwagging his tail back and forth left to right. “You raise pups. I no get in way. Pups important. They need their sire. You stay. You no leave mate and pups.”

Maple chattered to get both their attentions. She looked to one and then the other, nuzzling each in turn. “I chose both of you.”

Her first mate stared in confusion, his tail wigwagging rapidly. Beech froze in place waiting to see what would happen.

Tassel stepped in. “My adult pup no know.” She turned to her son. “My pup, here, you may share mates.”

“Yes,” Maple replied. “If you agree share, you both my mates. Is best solution.”

Tassel’s son wigwagged his tail hesitantly and was silent a moment before finally managing, “I will try.” He paused again. “Is hard take in. So much change, so fast. Learn littermate and I no alone. Now all shared territory. Always truce. Trust Biggens. Biggens share territory with us. Biggen is Elder. Dame head Elder. Dame’s new mate is Elder of Elders. Mate live. Mate have new mate. Share mates. Is hard.” He repeated as he wigwagged his tail in distress while lowering his head and placing his forepaws on it while closing his eyes. “It make my head hurt.”

Beech hesitantly sniffed him again, then gently nudged him to catch his eye. “Yes, is a lot all at once to understand, First Mate. I think you will like changes in time.” Beech snuggled up to the other male affectionately, who tensed at first as Beech started to groom him. Eventually, he

relaxed and looked deeply in Beech's eyes. Something seemed to change in Tassel's son as both he and Beech sat-up and embraced. Beech gestured towards Maple with his tail "I think we should give Maple some attention now that she choose both of us, don't you, First Mate?"

The unnamed male flicked his tail up and down once. In unison he and Beech began to groom Maple from either side before grooming each other again with Maple taking turns grooming each of them in turn. With a brief glance at Tassel they moved off together into the forest, Maple chatting away to catch-up her first mate on what he had missed. "...I sure our pups will like having a second sire..."

"Littermate has his mate again," Tassel's other son stated watching his brother depart. "Is good." He drooped his tail. "I saw predator bird hunt/kill mine."

"Ah, my pup," Tassel pulled him into an embrace to comfort him. "There are several females in our group who need a mate. Many in Elder Foxy's group lose their mates in the fire. I'm sure one of them will catch your eye soon. Come. You meet my current mate, Teacher, and your half-littermates, our pups from this winter." (drooptail) She began to lead him away as she added, "You know owl hunt/kill your sire."

He drooped his tail. "Yes, sire try and save some pups..." he stated, the rest of his sentence lost as he followed Tassel back through the treetops.

ELEVEN

Foxy and her family looked about as the others departed. "Cherries no stay fresh long after harvest. Cherries no like nuts. Come, we'll place the cherries in Kind's and Sunshine's cool midden. I think they keep longer there. We surprise them when they return."

They entered the biggens' tree and went into the kitchen space, opening the refrigerator and piled the two remaining backpacks filled with cherries within on a shelf. The cherries within the third backpack had been eaten while Tassel and company spoke to Tassel's lost sons.

"I wonder what Sunshine will make with the cherries?" Cherry mused.

"Yes, is strange how biggens cook their food," Brighteyes replied. "I think that word Elder Voice Friend used for how biggens use heat to change their food."

Red flicked her tail up and down once in the affirmative. "That is word he use. Some cook food is good. Some strange." She paused a moment as she gazed inside the cool midden. "Look at all the room in here! We could put three more backpacks with cherries in here, maybe more!"

Red, Cherry, and Brighteyes were all for going back to the cherry grove and harvest more cherries. What more could the adults do but agree with the enthusiastic pups. Others from among

the fire survivors arrived asking about the cherries, so Foxy and company led a small party of squirrels to the grove. Between harvesting and eating, they picked the six trees clean of ripe cherries within a pawspan of time. They estimated there would be more ready in three more days. Upon returning, they stuffed the cold midden tight with cherries. Two more backpacks wouldn't fit. They placed one of them in front of the cold midden. One of the other squirrels took the other to share with others in the forest.

"Won't Elder Kind and Sunshine be surprised when they get home," the pups chanted in unison.

"Surprised about what?" Jessophat asked from the doorway as he entered with Carulin and Saniel right behind him. All three had backpacks on.

Birch and her mate nervously wigwagged their tails doing their best to fight down the instinct to flee as they moved to one side to give the bigger squirrels plenty of room. Their pups showed none of their fear as they excitedly bounced-up to the three larger squirrels.

"We harvest cherries today!" they chanted in unison.

Carulin looked to the three pups with cherry stains in their muzzle fur and then gasped as she looked at the backpack in front of her refrigerator. She gasped again upon opening the door, seeing how stuffed full within it was with more backpacks. She looked over at Jessophat and Saniel. "We'll have to put what we brought home in the guest fridge." Saniel nodded and headed down tree with his backpack. She turned to the pups and switched to chitterspeak. "Our one tree no grow so many cherries at once."

"There are six trees, Dame Sunshine," Red responded.

All three pups flicked their tails up and down once in the affirmative.

"A pawspan climb towards sunrise," Brighteyes said.

"And there will be just as many ready to harvest in three days!" Cherry added enthusiastically.

Jessophat started laughing as Carulin glanced at him. He spoke in Common. "Tassel pointed them out to Foxy and me when we inspected the property two days ago. The grove is in the territory Tassel's people claimed before we joined forces, hon."

Quietly, Saniel returned and took Carulin's backpack and departed again.

Carulin drooped her tail briefly. "I guess I busy tomorrow," she chattered. She looked at the pups. "And if your dame lets you, you can help me."

"We can?" they asked. They looked over to Birch, who hesitated a moment. She glanced at Foxy who flicked her tail up and down once. Birch then did likewise. They excitedly darted back to Carulin. "We can!"

“Come back tomorrow morning. You help me make,” she switched to Common, “jam.” She switched back to chitterspeak only uttering jam in Common as needed. “We will need to ask Friend if his people have a chitterspeak word for it. If no word, we may need to make one for it.”

“What is it?” they asked in near unison, their tails slowly wigwagging up and down, curling at the peak briefly.

Again, Saniel returned, taking his father’s backpack, and leaving.

“Is way to save fruit for whole year,” Carulin replied. She carefully opened the refrigerator fearing one of the backpacks might fall out and pulled a yellow jar off a shelf in the door. She opened it and let the pups sniff. “This is jam. My last from last year’s cherries. Stick a claw in it and lick.”

All three pups’ faces lit up after trying cherry jam. “Is cherries. Is sweeter than cherries. Is good!”

“And to make jam, I’ll need to wash all those cherries, remove any stems and all the pits. That’s where your help comes in.” She glanced over at Foxy, Birch, and Birch’s mate. “You can come sniff and try it, too. Jam is for everyone, no just pups.”

Foxy showed no hesitation as she came forward to sniff and try the cherry jam. “Birch and her mate still scared of you and Kind, Dame Sunshine,” she chittered quietly to Carulin. She sniffed the strange looking yellow substance. It smelled of cherries. She stuck a claw in it and licked it. It tasted like cherries but much sweeter. It was good just as her grandpups had declared.

Birch’s and her mate’s curiosity enabled them to fight through their fear and approach. They each tried the jam and liked it.

“This is good,” Birch agreed.

Her mate flicked his tail up and down once. “Is good. I no think I could eat a lot at once. Very sweet.”

Carulin nodded. “It is very sweet. Is only way to preserve it.” She covered the jar and placed it back in the refrigerator. “Biggens spread it on other food.”

Birch glanced at the others. “Come my pups! We should leave and let Elders Kind and Sunshine be. You three need to clean your fur of all that sticky cherry juice.”

The pups bowed to Sunshine in thanks and then followed their parents out.

Saniel returned as the cousin squirrels departed. Carulin looked over at Jessophat.

“I don’t have enough jars to process all of these. Even with their help to clean and pit them, there’s too many. It would take me several days. I’ve never seen so many cherries at one time. Not even when I go to the store in town.”

Jessophat shook his head in amusement trying not to laugh again. “Tassel is a much to blame as me. While we were showing Foxy the combined territory of The Refuge, Tassel was stressing about the fall harvest already. She’s worried about it. I think it was because she wasn’t expecting an additional fifty mouths to feed beyond our current group for this year. And it will be our first under a ‘total truce’ as she calls it. The harvest needs to be successful for the good of all in the colony. I think this was Foxy’s way to show her people aren’t going to slack off when the time comes. And to show how quickly they can harvest whatever is in season. They probably ate their fill before filling those backpacks based on how yellow the pups’ muzzles were. And this was just the first round from only six trees. It didn’t occur to me to point to the other grove that I noticed as we passed in the territory that Tassel’s people originally claimed nor did I point out your coveted tree near the far end of what had been our property. Maybe there are other groves out there.”

“Dad?” Saniel asked raising his tail to gain attention.

“What is it?”

“There’s a small food processing plant in town. Couldn’t we just bring all the cherries there? At least the ones that aren’t going to be eaten right off?”

Jessophat’s eyes widened. He had forgotten about the plant that sits idle until the fall harvest.

“Brilliant! Great thinking, Saniel.” Jessophat paused a moment. “However, I’ll need to discuss it with the rest of the council first. These cherries should be considered common property.”

“I will still make some into jam tomorrow or those pups will be disappointed.”

“Of course.”

TWELVE

Back near their nesting tree, Birch led her pups to the brook to wash the cherry stains off their muzzles and to drink.

“See, Kind and Sunshinre are no all that bad,” Foxy said while getting a drink herself. She lapped for a while and then continued. “They’re more like big squirrels who use biggen tools as I and Elder Tassel speak in past. Did you see their pup quietly took what they brought to the nest down to the other cool midden while we talked about how Sunshine preserves cherries.”

“I still scared. I know they no mean harm,” Birch replied after she lapped some water. “They biggens. Is one thing hard to accept in our new home.”

“Is alright. I scared too. We get use to them in time,” Birch’s mate tried to reassure her. “Dame Foxy right. Compare them to other Biggens we met before coming here. They different. More like us than other Biggens.”

“Speaking of biggens,” Foxy replied as her memory was jogged. “Other biggens will come visit soon and stay for rest of summer. These are no the ones working on other meeting/storage trees. Different biggens.”

Birch and her mate wigwagged their tails nervously. Their pups paid no attention as they splashed each other in the brook. They had long since finished washing their muzzles and turned the task into a game. It had become a very warm early summer afternoon. They were pretending they were otters and beavers, enjoying the cool feeling of the water soaking their fur as they splashed about and swam.

“You no go too far,” Birch chided them before turning back to Foxy.

“Other Elders tell me they safe,” Foxy continued. “One is biggen raccoon who spend much time learn about smart squirrels. Other is smart squirrel like us who born biggen squirrel. Had accident other biggens no understand and grow small into smart squirrel. Raccoon and squirrel mates.”

The Birch and her mate gasped.

“Yes, is strange what some biggens do. She also former biggen Elder. Biggens have one biggen Elder Council for whole world. So many biggens, they take turns serve as Elder. Serve for two seasons. She serve last summer through harvest time. They come so she can try get Friend be second mate like just now with Elder Tassel’s pup. Pinecone share Friend with her so she can have pups as she and first mate can no make pups.”

“Biggens strange to choose mate no same as them. No can make pups then,” Birch’s mate stated.

Foxy flicked her tail up and down once in agreement. “Biggens can be strange.” She looked up at a nearby tree trunk as Pinecone made her way down towards them. Her four pups followed and quickly joined the others in their splashing game in the brook.

Pinecone flicked her tail up and down once in agreement as she overheard Foxy’s final sentence. “Agree, biggens can be strange. By the noise those three are making,” She pointed towards the pups in the brook with her tail. “I know I find you here.” She bowed to Birch and her mate and wigwagged her tail in greeting. “And now mine have joined yours.” She gigglechittered a moment. “Is a good day to play in cool water. I know you and others who come from Foxy’s forest are still adjusting to our ways here in The Refuge. So are we. I think always truce rule is good. If no truce, we could no meet like this without first asking ‘Truce?’ and then approach

each other nervously. And pups could no play together. Is as new to us as you. Change can be hard. We all try this new change together.”

The other adults flicked the tails up and down once in agreement. Though things were different in this forest, they could see how that different was good compared to their old forest. They all watched the pups’ antics for a time. Finally, Pinecone looked at Foxy. “I drop by to speak to you Elder Foxy. Elder Kind ask we hold council meeting this evening a pawspan before sunset at Kind’s nest.”

“What we discuss?”

Pinecone gigglechittered briefly before answering, “cherries.”

Foxy drooped her tail.

“Is no bad,” Pinecone reassured her, touching her shoulder briefly with one of her forepaws in reassurance. “You no worry. You and family no in trouble. You see.”

Birch’s mate wigwagged his tail nervously. “As I speak before you arrive Elder Pinecone, Kind and Sunshine scare me.”

“They more like big squirrels than Biggens,” Pinecone replied echoing Foxy’s earlier statement without knowing it. “Once you get to know them you will agree. I very scared of them when I first meet them. I got use to them in time. And they no scary like biggen elder bobcat I met last summer. We flew on large biggen flyer together. We learned a lot from each other. We hugged.”

The others gasped. “Biggen bobcat no hunt you?”

Pinecone wigwagged her tail from left to right once. “No all Biggens hunt. She no hunt. I scared when I hug her. I did so to show I understand she good biggen.”

They fell silent for a few ceklicks before Pinecone continued. “I want to watch pups play more, but I must go speak to Elders Teacher and Tassel about meeting.” She turned to Birch, “May my pups stay a while longer and play?” She raised her tail briefly in a curl.

Birch flicked her tail up and down once and replied, “They may stay. No pups for long. They have fun while pups.”

Pinecone flicked her tail up and down once in agreement with Birch’s statement while bowing in thanks. She then called out to her pups. “Cloud, Chitter, Blossom, Twig!”

The four pups paused and looked at their mother. “Ah, Dame, we leave already?” Blossom asked for the four of them. “We just start have fun.” All four drooped their soaked tails back into the brook. Chitter, in the center and a little ahead of his three siblings suddenly shook all over, splashing the others with the water he shook out of his fur. He grinned back at them.

Pinecone wigwagged her tail left to right in the negative. "I must leave and go speak to your grandsire and granddame. Birch speak you may stay."

"Yeah!" They were joined in by Birch's pups in their excitement.

"When Birch speak you need go home, you obey Birch like she your dame. No argue. You leave when she speak leave"

"We will!" they called out in unison and then looked at Birch, bowing slightly. "Thank you, Dame Birch!" Chitter's siblings piled on top of him, dunking him in the brook. They all then quickly went back to splashing with the others.

THIRTEEN

Foxy arrived at the meeting to find that the other members of the council and Aldin were there ahead of her. "Am I in trouble?" she asked as she nervously wigwagged her tail.

All wigwagged their tails left to right and back once, even Kind.

"You no in trouble," Tassel stated on behalf of the others.

"Elder Kind, as you ask for meeting, speak," Tassel replied.

"You and your family did surprise my mate, Foxy," Kind stated. "She can no preserve all the cherries you and your family harvested today. Is why I ask for meeting. Some of what I must speak I can only use Biggenspeak for." He drooped his tail and looked at Foxy. "I know you no hear Biggenspeak. I try my best to explain in chitterspeak, but it no have enough words. I may need Biggenspeak for some of it. I drop Elder title we all Elders here except Friend, no need use title."

All flicked their tails up and down once on the suggestion to drop titles for the meeting. Foxy briefly bowed her head in understanding. Inside, she was a little afraid to learn Biggenspeak, but understood she would eventually need to do so as an Elder of the colony due to how they must interact with Biggens now and then. She was as afraid of learning it as her daughter was afraid of Kind, Sunshine, and Energy.

Kind accepted the head nod as permission to continue. "Sunshine will preserve some cherries tomorrow and your grandpups will help as already arranged, Foxy. We no have the tools to preserve all you, your family, and the others harvest today. Sunshine has tools for cherries from one tree only as that is all we need in past. There is only one tree in what had been our territory before we joined The Refuge. My pup, Energy, suggest we contact nearby Biggen colony. They have tools to preserve the rest and more. I speak to them on Biggen viewer and discuss. I speak

to them again after discuss with other Elders. Is why I ask for meeting. Cherries belong to colony.”

Kind paused gathering his thoughts before continuing. “What classes you attend here so far, Foxy?”

Foxy was caught off guard by the question which seemed a change of subject. “I learn Elder things from Teacher.”

“Have you attended any of Friend’s classes about Biggen things?”

Foxy wigwagged her tail left to right and then drooped it. “I miss last class when you, Tassel, and I climbed through our combined territory. My grandpups attend. They explain to their dame, sire, and I how Biggens choose to learn a lot about one thing and trade that knowledge or food with each other. I think you try explain a little about trade as we look over territory. You trade extra butternuts for other things. It sound strange to me.”

Kind visually relaxed. “Good. I was no sure where to start. We must trade for the work Biggens are doing to make other trees into meeting and midden storage. If send squirrel to healer, must trade for work healer does.”

“I speak sound strange, but I understand a little. Biggens doing such things no have time to gather food.”

Kind smiled and wigwagged his tail up and down once. “Yes, is one way to look at it. I ask this council meeting to discuss trading extra cherries to help with that work. Biggens in nearby colony would trade some of the cherries to preserve rest. We then trade preserve cherries for other things we need here.” He looked at Tassel.

“There are three more cherry groves in our old territory,” she said without needing to be asked. “The one you harvest today was small with six trees. The others have as many as five and ten trees each.”

“There is also one cherry tree at far end of what was my territory as I speak before,” Kind added. “Was only tree I knew before our climb the other day. Is why Sunshine was so surprised by all the cherries today. I suggest we send out squirrels to eat what they wish and then harvest rest to trade with Biggens.”

“What can we get from Biggens for cherries?” Foxy asked.

“This where it gets harder explain in chitterspeak,” Kind replied. “Biggens use trade system called,” he switched to Common for the next word, “‘credits’.” He switched back to chitterspeak speaking the word, credits, in Common as needed. “Biggen who has things or service you want may no want what you have to offer in trade. That is where credits are used. Different things worth different number credits. Biggens trade credits for what they do and to get what they want.

I know Pinecone and Friend,” he nodded to each, “understand Biggen trade system. I no know if the rest of you do.”

“I know what grandpups explain,” Foxy responded. “No more.”

“I try to learn,” Teacher replied. “Is complicated.”

Tassel flicked her tail up and down once. “Same as Teacher.”

Kind nodded. “Yes, it can be complicated. Right now, Biggens will trade four credits for one,” he switched to Biggenspeak for the next word and back to chitterspeak, “kilo⁴ of ripe cherries.” He looked at Foxy. “Kilo is Biggen measure for weight. You weigh about half of one kilo. I weigh about one kilo.”

Foxy flicked her tail up and down once as she considered how much she, herself, weighed in Biggen measure system. “Is that good trade for things The Refuge need from Biggens?”

Kind flicked his tail up and down once.

“How we trade to Biggens who hollow out trees for extra meeting places and midden storage?” Foxy asked raising and curling her tail briefly. “We no harvest all cherries yet.”

Kind drooped his tail. “I make trade from my credit um...midden, no right word in chitterspeak, but is closest word. I need more chitterspeak numbers to explain amount. I know all now understand one through ten and then count in tens. If only count in tens will take a while to explain amount.” He turned to Aldin and switched to Common. “Does Terran chitterspeak have a word for one hundred?”

“Yes, I haven’t taught the word as it has not really been needed until now.” Aldin replied and chittered the word. Kind repeated it. Aldin nodded that he got it right.

“How about a thousand?” at the questioning as they understood those numbers in Biggenspeak. Tassel, Teacher, and Pinecone began to wigwag their tails rapidly as they began to wonder just how many Biggen credits this cost if he was asking for the word for a thousand. Tassel and Teacher didn’t have a concept of how big a thousand really was, but it had to be big. They had heard the term before. Pinecone understood as she had lived most of her life with Kind and his family.

Again, Aldin chittered the word and nodded when Kind repeated it correctly. He then asked in Common, “Just how much is it costing, Jessophat?”

Jessophat drooped his tail and replied in Common, “We’re off grid and need solar panels in addition to the work of hollowing out the trees, plus wiring for the lighting, plumbing, small leach fields for the bathroom, and wells. Believe it or not, it’s less costly that way than one large

⁴ Kilo-kilogram, 2.2 pounds

leach field and well in between the trees. Less plumbing and less likely for something to freeze-up in winter.”

“So how much?”

Kind drooped his tail. “About seventy-thousand credits, Aldin.”

Tassel, Teacher, and Pinecone wigwag their tails even more rapidly not believing what portions they understood of the conversation. Foxy’s tail started to wigwag nervously simply because of how they wigwagged their tails though she didn’t understand a word of the Biggenspeak other than ‘credits’ though she could tell it wasn’t good by the distress in Kind’s voice.

Aldin chitter-whistled long and loud at the amount. He then turned to the others. “I need explain for you to fully understand. Is very big number. You know ten,” he held-up all ten claws. “My people call ten tens one hundred.” He flashed his ten claws ten times. “Ten hundreds is one thousand, which I won’t demonstrate. It take too long.” He paused as they nodded. He looked at Tassel. “How many squirrels live in The Refuge?”

Tassel thought for a moment. “about one hundreds and five tens,” she replied and looked at Jessopha, “And three biggen squirrels.”

Aldin nodded. “Good.” He turned to Foxy. “How many nuts do you normally gather for winter?”

Foxy thought for a moment as her eyes grew very wide. “Depends on the nut. If butternuts five thousands.” Her eyes widened briefly again. “Thousand is very large number.”

Aldin flicked his tail up and down once. “It is. I ask to make sure you understand when I explain next.” He paused a very brief moment. “Kind trade biggens seven tens thousands,” he switched to Common for the next word and then back to chitterspeak, “credits for tree work.”

The other cousin squirrels all chitter-whistled long and loud.

“Is very big number,” Tassel stated.

Teacher was too surprised and shocked to say anything.

They all fell silent a moment. Foxy’s body seemed to tense-up. Her tail wigwagged back and forth rapidly for a moment as she worked the courage to speak-up. “We should have squirrels eat what cherries they want and harvest some of the rest to trade with Biggens as Kind suggest. If Kind trade from his biggen trade midden for The Refuge, we must refill his trade midden. Is no right Kind give so much for all of us. We also no only forest dwellers who rely on cherries and other food sources. Would be no right if we take them all.”

“Foxy wise beyond her winters,” Teacher praised. “We must be careful to no take all the cherries just as when we each had own territory, we no take all nuts from trees.”

“Agreed,” Tassel replied. “All in favor of harvesting some of the cherries to trade with Biggens to help refill Kind’s trade midden?”

The others except Aldin and Kind raised their tails in agreement. Aldin, not being a member of the council, knew he should not vote. The others looked at Kind when he did not raise or drop his tail.

“I no vote as vote affects me. Is no right I vote on this,” he said. The others accepted that explanation.

FOURTEEN

Satisfied with that decision, Tassel continued. “We must create our own trade midden for The Refuge,” Tassel looked directly at Jessopha. “Our people already owe you so much, Kind, for helping us survive last winter. You should no do this from your trade midden for us.”

Again, all members of the council including Kind raised their tails in favor of establishing a bank account for The Refuge.

Aldin spoke up. “Kind and I suspect you would choose to do that. Biggens have rules on how ‘trade middens’ work. Right now, only Biggens, certain small biggens,” Aldin raised his tail, “and Biggen colonies may have trade middens. Kind and I work with Biggens so they will treat The Refuge like a Biggen colony and allow our colony to have a trade midden.”

“It is why I spend so much time away from The Refuge the last few weeks,” Kind said and then looked at Foxy, “You no here when I last need to do this when Council choose Friend as Elder Voice to Biggens. Is hard explain without Biggenspeak.”

“Biggenspeak have symbol version,” Pinecone jumped in. “Many Biggen rules require use of symbol version to remember decisions later.” She pulled her flatpanel off her back and started tapping at the screen. “I show you example.” She turned the viewer around to show symbols on the screen to Foxy. “This biggenspeak symbols for ‘The Refuge.’” She tapped a small square next to it and the viewer spoke ‘The Refuge’ in Biggenspeak. “And this is what it sound like in Biggenspeak. This is how I Biggenspeak to biggens when I must.” She tucked the viewer back on her back. “Biggenspeak symbols are needed to track who has a trade midden and how much they have in it.”

Kind nodded and flicked his tail up and down once. “I draw a lot of biggenspeak symbols over last few weeks so The Refuge will have a trade midden. I know it would take time and you would ask sooner or later. Biggen rules require at least two council members draw symbols to create colony trade midden. Biggens consider Friend as council member as he serve as Elder Voice.”

Tassel leaned over and hugged the bigger squirrel in thanks and then she hugged Aldin. "Thank you, both of you, for all you've done for us." When she pulled back from Aldin she added looking at both of them, "Next time you deal with Biggens for The Refuge, bring it to Elder Council first."

Both bowed in acknowledgement of the light reprimand.

Kind then turned to the others again. "I ask Friend to be here as he is our Elder Voice. I suggest we have Friend speak to Biggens about trade. What we Biggens call, 'negotiate,'" again he used Biggenspeak for the last word and then switched back. "If he is willing, that is."

Aldin bowed his head briefly. "The Refuge is my home as much as yours. I serve the Council as asked. I will do this with the Council's approval. Biggens offer you four credits a kilo. Maybe I can get us a little more."

All the members of the council raised their tails once to appoint Aldin as their trade negotiator.

"Are we done?" Teacher asked. "Sun set soon."

"Almost," Tassel replied looking hard at Aldin. "Last winter you took Lily to healer. How you trade with healer?"

"I give from my trade midden, Tassel."

"Is no right. We should refill your trade midden too."

Aldin wigwagged his tail left to right vigorously. "No. Is my fault you form colony instead of go back to old ways of individual territories. You become more like me, like Small Biggens, whether you believe so or no. I want colony to succeed. I have credits to share. I know what like to no have trade midden. It was hard when I first arrive among Biggens with no trade midden. I had broken foreleg."

Tassel gasped. She hadn't heard that story during the winter. A broken limb was a death sentence for a squirrel.

"A biggen give from his trade midden to healer to bind my break so it could heal and I can climb again. Biggens struggle to give me trade midden after. Once I had trade midden, I trade my knowledge of my people with Biggens for credits. They have many old rules in place about trade midden. They had to make me a 'Biggen' to give me one. That was before I join The Refuge. I still trade in that way. I trade my credits as I choose, Tassel. If you try to refill my trade midden for Lily's healer visit, I will move them back to the colony's trade midden."

Pinecone stepped in. "Before the owl attacks, if there was a winter storm and you shared your nest and food with others, did your require them to replace food you share?"

Tassel wigwagged her tail left to right and back once. “No, I share with others in one storm. They share in next.”

Pinecone flicked her tail up and down once. “Is like that. Friend help Lily. Lily already return what Friend give her and more with how she help care for your grandpups,”

Tassel flicked her tail up and down once. “I understand. We one colony. We help each other.”

Pinecone and Aldin flicked their tails up and down once.

Foxy drooped her tail. “How many of these Biggen trade things were needed to help my people?”

“Biggen Elders will no tell me,” Aldin replied. “They say, they give credits needed to help you and the others move here after bad Biggens burn your forest. Is least they can do to make up for bad Biggens.”

Foxy simply nodded in acceptance. The others agreed to end the meeting and dispersed into the forest.

FIFTEEN

The following morning, Birch’s pups with their sire in tow arrived at Jessophat’s and Carulin’s nest tree. Carulin met them at the entrance. The three pups sniffed her. Their sire was hesitant but did so at the encouragement of his pups. To his surprise, she smelled like the forest like other smart squirrels and not like the biggens they had encountered right after the fire. The pups gave her their names. They then explained that their sire hadn’t chosen one yet. Carulin glanced at him. He grasped his tail to keep it from wigwagging in fear and confirmed. Carulin nodded.

“Go on in, Red, Cherry, and Brighteyes. You will see where to wash your paws near the ‘cool midden’. I need speak to your sire a moment.”

“Okay, Dam Sunshine!” they replied in unison and bounded inside heading to the kitchen.

With his pups out-of-sight, he let go of his tale and allowed it to wigwag in circles over his head. Carulin drooped her tail.

“I sorry I scare you, mate of Birch,” she chittered quietly. “You no need to stay. Your pups are safe with me. I no harm pups.”

“I can no leave pups alone,” he replied.

Carulin flicked her tail up and down once. "You good sire. Come, join us. You can help your pups clean cherries."

He hesitated for a brief moment and then followed the biggen into the tree. He found his three pups nibbling on cherries.

"We can no resist, sire," Cherry said for the three of them. "Cherries so good!"

He glanced at Carulin.

She gigglechittered. "My pup, Energy, eat several while he help me clean and pit cherries in summers past. I always make sure to have more cherries then need. Come, you need to wash your paws just like your pups." She showed him the sink, which he recognized from the one in the emergency shelter, washed his front paws and joined his pups. Carulin placed two large wooden bowls in front of them. She pointed to one, "Put stems and pits in here." She then pointed to the other, "Put cherries in here."

She then joined in with them and they cleaned and pitted cherries for a while. Once the bowl was filled, she moved it over the counter, dumped it in a large pot and brought the bowl back over. "When you fill this again, stop."

"Okay!" the pups replied. They nibbled one cherry for every five or so they cleaned and pitted.

Meanwhile, Carulin opened a jar of honey and added a few spoonfuls to the pot and stirred.

"It's full!" the pups cried out.

Carulin bowed in thanks as she retrieved it. The pups followed her over near the stove.

"You need to stand back a little," she warned them. "This biggen cooking tool. It get very hot like fire. It could burn and cook you just like it will cook the cherries. Must always be careful near cooking tool."

Their sire helped keep them back a little bit. He nervously wigwagged his tail.

Carulin added some more honey to the pot and the rest of the cherries. She stirred it as it heated-up. The pups could feel the heat from where they stood back.

"The honey is why it tastes sweet. It needed to help preserve the cherries," she explained as she added the rest of the jar of honey to the pot and kept stirring. The scent of cherries and honey filled the kitchen. The pups and their sire nibbled more cherries while watching Carulin cook down the honey/cherry mix. It began to bubble. "Not long now," she said over her shoulder at her watchers. "I'll show you."

She tilted the pot so they could see how the cherries had melted down and combined with the honey. They stared in wonder as it bubbled. She reached into the freezer, pulled out a plate and dribbled a little of the steaming mixture onto it. She placed it back in the freezer and moved the

pot off the hot burner. After a couple ceklicks passed, she pulled the plate back out to show them.

“This test to see if jam is ready,” she explained and nudged the dollop with one of her claws. It wobbled making the pups giggle. “It wiggles, is ready. Now I fill,” she switched to Common for the next word, “jars.” They looked at her. She thought for a moment. “Biggen tool for storing jam.” She showed them one of the clear glass containers.

She lined ten up on the counter. Placed a funnel in one and spooned the hot, steaming cherry mixture into it. She quickly moved the funnel from jar to jar. She then wiped the tops of the jars with a cloth and placed a cover on each. She then used jar tongs to lower them into a larger pot with steaming water in it. She covered the pot and increased the heat until steam caused the lid to wobble a little. The pups watched through all this in fascination. It was one thing to have Elder Voice Friend explain Biggens cooked their food. It was another to actually watch one do it.

“Dame Sunshine?” Bright Eyes asked and paused until he had her attention. “Where did the rest of the cherries go. We clean enough to fill this,” he pointed to the bowl, “two times. What you put in those things would no fill it one time.”

Carulin smiled. “Is good question. I no know if I can give answer in chitterspeak well. I try.” As she replied, the lid on the water bath pot wobbled some more as steam escaped from it. “If you heat water up enough it turn into air. That is why cover wobbles now. There is a lot of water in cherries. As I cook cherries, water in cherries turn into air. Is why it smell so much of cherries here as I cook cherries. Once in jars, I cook cherries more. Jars will seal, keep air out. With no air, cherries take long, long time to go bad.”

Enough time had gone by. Using mitts, she removed the lid from the water bath pot. She then pulled the jars out with tongs and set them at the far end of the counter on a wire rack to cool.

“You no touch jars. Very hot. Will burn you. We have something to eat and then time to clean more cherries. I show you some biggen food.”

Carulin reached on the other counter and pulled open a door on a small box and removed a loaf of bread from within. She brought it to the table to show the pups and their sire.

“Biggens call this,” she switched to Common for the next word, “bread. Sniff.”

All four of the cousin squirrels did so, both the pups and their sire.

“Smell a little like butternuts,” Red said.

Carulin flicked her tail up and down once. “If you cook butternuts and dry them, you can grind them into powder. Mix powder with other things and cook again and you can make bread.” She reached in a drawer and pulled-out a serrated knife. “This tool like our claws but longer. Is very sharp. You no put your paws near bread while I cut it with tool.” She cut a couple slices off the

loaf. She then cut the slices into smaller pieces. “Take one and nibble a little and tell me what you think.”

The three pups did so. Their sire followed suit after hesitating a moment.

“Taste a little like butternuts, but soft,” Brighteyes said.

Cherry wigwagged her tail up and down once, adding, “Is a little dry.”

Carulin wigwagged her tail up and down once in agreement. “Yes. Now, remember how I told you yesterday we put jam on other food to make it taste better?” She scrapped the remaining just cooked jam out of the pot and spread it on their bread slices. “Try that.”

The muzzles of all four cousin squirrels lit-up. It made it taste so much better.

“I see you like that.” Carulin reached into another cabinet and pulled out a jar with a light brown substance in it. She opened the lid. “Smell this.”

All four were surprised by the smell. “Is butternuts,” their sire stated as he began to relax in the presence of the biggen squirrel.

Carulin wigwagged her tail up and down once. “If you no cook butternuts and just grind them you get this. We call it butternut,” she switched to Common for the next word, “butter.” She spread some on another piece of bread for each of them. “Try that.”

All four loved it. “Is real good!” Cherry exclaimed.

“Good. Now, take the two pieces of bread and place them together like this.” Carulin sandwiched a slice with jam and a slice with butternutbutter together. “And try that.”

She watched the reaction on their muzzles. They liked it too much to say anything as they quickly ate through their BB&J sandwiches. Some of the filling squeezed out onto their paws, which they licked clean. The three pups asked for more. Carulin glanced to their sire for permission.

“They growing pups, always hungry,” he responded flicking his tail up and down once.

“And you?” Carulin raised her tail in a curl.

“I no need more,” he replied and bowed slightly in thanks.

As the pups nibbled on BB&J sandwiches, their sire asked Carulin, “Why do biggens cook their food like this?”

“Some things different between biggens and smart squirrels, Mate of Birch,” she replied. “As Elder Tassel told you when you first arrived here, we grow slower and live longer than you. Like my mate, I see three tens and three winters.”

His eyes grew wide a moment. He had forgotten that.

“Biggens can see up to seven tens winters. Only creator know how many I will see. That one example. Biggens cook food for no know how long in past. One reason is our tooth no like your tooth. Your front tooth grow and grow. Biggens’ tooth do not. If I tried to bite into a butternut in the shell, I would break my tooth. Cook food is soft as you have tried. We need our food to be soft to protect our tooth. Our tooth need to last a very long time.”

The pups finished their sandwiches as she finished explaining. Without being asked they made their way back to the sink and washed their front paws. Their sire followed them and washed his too. Carulin lined more empty jars on the counter. “We make two more batches of jam. Let’s work on preparing more cherries.” Some of the first jars popped loudly, startling the pups and their sire. “That good sound. It mean jars sealed.”

With full stomachs the pups didn’t nibble any more cherries as they worked to pit the next batch.

“Dame Sunshine,” Brighteyes spoke-up and then hesitated a moment as she gave him her attention. He then continued. “I know predators fear biggens. What happened to Energy’s littermates?”

Brighteyes’ two sisters fell silent and stared at him. Their sire tensed up. Brighteyes realized his mistake as he had asked the question no smart squirrel should ever ask another smart squirrel. He began to tear-up.

“I sorry, Dame Sunshine! I should no ask that.” He began to bawl.

Carulin glanced at his sire seeking visual permission. He hesitated and then flicked his tail up and down once. She moved over to Brighteyes and scooped him up and hugged him close shushing him with reassuring chitters.

“You have nothing to be afraid of. Energy is our only pup. He never had littermates.”

The other pups and their sire gasped in surprise. Teary-eyed, Brighteyes pulled back from the embrace and stared at Carulin in disbelief.

“Remember, I speak earlier Biggens are different than smart squirrels in some ways? How we grow more slowly, live longer and our tooth are no only way.” She drooped her tail, “But I need permission from your sire before I speak further on why Energy is our only pup.” She looked directly at their sire. “I and Kind have explained to our pup already about raising pups. I no know

at what age smart squirrels explain such to their pups. I speak around what I really mean as I no want to speak on topic if you and mate no speak on it yet.”

Birch’s mate flicked his tail up and down once understanding. “Dame Sunshine, my mate and I explain to our pups where they come from just before fire. We explain again and more as they ask.”

All three pups flicked their tails up and down once and happily and quickly explained how ‘pups are made’.

“You all very smart to learn and remember all that as your age,” Carulin praised them. She turned back to their sire. “I ask as to answer Brighteyes’ question, I may need to explain a little how it is different for biggens. I no want to go further if they no know already. I see they do.”

Their sire flicked his tail up and down once granting permission and bowed in thanks for her asking permission to speak on that subject.

They continued to pit cherries as Carulin explained the difference between smart squirrel and biggen squirrel biology. The pups and their sire were amazed. Biggens only have one pup at a time, sometimes two compared to their own four on average. Biggen females had a difficult time getting pregnant, not even their healers understood why. Pups take two seasons to grow in their dame before they are born. The pups couldn’t imagine how big their dame would be if they had been in her that long before being born. A lucky family had two or three pups at most, all born in different years. The pups couldn’t imagine that.

Carulin dumped the second bowl of cherries into the pot and started cooking them like before, adding honey as needed. “Since I gave birth to Energy, though Kind and I try many times to ‘make more pups’, no pups take.” She drooped her tail a little as she continued stirring the pot until it started to bubble. When she was happy with how it looked and smelled, she did another cold plate test. After placing the plate back in the freezer, the pups suddenly pounced on and snuggle-hugged her as a group. It felt good as they nuzzled into her fur as she embraced all three of them.

“I sorry,” Brighteyes said, wiping a new round of tears that formed in his eyes. “I no mean to hurt Dame Sunshine. You so kind to show us how you cook food and teach us how biggens different from smart squirrels.”

“Is alright,” she chattered back. “You no know. You curious pup, wish to learn. Is good to ask and learn. Now you know some things about biggens you no know before.”

She pulled the plate out. This time, the pups tested it and agreed the jam was ready. As Carulin filled the second round of jars, the four cousin squirrels prepared cherries for the third and final batch. The third batch seemed to go quickly as Carulin spoke about other things about biggens including how most biggen squirrels kept their claws trimmed and did not climb trees, which amazed all four cousin squirrels.

Once all the jars were out of the pot and placed on the counter, Carulin turned back to the pups and hugged them one at a time thanking them by name. They thanked her in turn. She then glanced at their sire. He hesitantly accepted a hug too and relaxed in the warm embrace.

She quietly chattered in his ear, “You very brave, good sire. Thank you for sharing your pups with me for the day. I miss having young, curious pups in my nest.”

When he pulled back, he bowed slightly in thanks and acknowledgement.

EPILOGUE

That evening, as they played in the brook near their nest tree, Birch’s pups spoke about helping Sunshine cook cherries and all that they had learned about biggens. The pups did their best to explain how Sunshine cooked cherries. Their sire confirmed to Birch what they explained. Even Birch was amazed at the differences between them and biggen squirrels. Her mate admitted he was now much less scared of Sunshine. He described to Birch how the biggen smelled more like them, like the forest around them, then how the other biggens smelled, the ones who helped them after the fire. He explained how Sunshine was kind and patient with the pups answering their questions as best as she could in terms they could understand, even after Brighteyes had accidentally asked the question Birch had warned him never ask any squirrel. And how that led to how the process of ‘making pups’ was different for biggens after asking him permission to do so. Birch was amazed to learn biggens only had one pup at a time. She had simply assumed some very hungry predators had taken Energy’s littermates. It never occurred to her that biggens only had one pup at a time.

Over the next three days, those who harvested the cherries ate their fill of the fruit. However, there was still plenty to send to trade with the Biggens while leaving a portion in the trees for other animals and birds as the Elders had decided. Aldin, Jessopah, and Saniel, made many trips in hovercrafts between the cherry groves and the food processor. Throughout the harvest period Birch’s pups would speak to anyone who would about their experience cooking with Dame Sunshine and what they learned about biggen squirrels.

Blossom tagged along with Saniel indicating she wanted to learn how to pilot a hovercraft. Saniel was a good biggenspeak teacher, so, she reasoned, he would be good at teaching how to pilot a hovercraft. Both sets of parents suspected there might be something more to it than that. However, they were all too busy with this harvest “dry run” to discuss it at that moment. By the end of the third day, Blossom was able to pilot the hovercraft herself and she was quite proud of the accomplishment. When she was sure no one was looking, she briefly snuggled Saniel in thanks.

In all, roughly ten thousand kilos of cherries were sent to be processed and sold. Aldin was able to negotiate a slightly higher fee of four-and-a-half credits per kilo pointing out the cherries were wild organic, harvested by hard working cousin squirrels proud to share their bounty with

Biggens. The produce distributor he negotiated with would use the same argument to fetch an even higher price in retail locations and make a good profit. Cousin squirrel harvested wild cherries were a novelty hit in the market and sold-out quickly.

The Elder council agreed more cherry trees would need to be planted for future harvests. Tassel ceased worrying about the success of the fall harvest. Instead, she worried to herself if there would be enough midden space to store it.