

The hovercraft silently settled to the forest floor. The door opened. A citizen raccoon and cousin squirrel stepped out. Three citizen squirrels waited for them.

“Welcome, Raoul and Butternut,” Jessophat greeted. “I hope it was an uneventful trip.”

“It was a good trip,” Butternut answered, hugging the three citizen squirrels in turn. “I’m finally getting better at suppressing the fear.”

“That’s good, Elder Butternut,” Saniel replied as they hugged.

“I am no longer a representative, Master Saniel.”

“I understand, Ms. Butternut, but get used to being called Elder. You served on the ‘Biggen Elder Council’ and as such, here at The Refuge, most will call you Elder.”

Raoul looked long and hard at Saniel. He was now just slightly smaller than his parents. “I didn’t realize it was you at first, Master Saniel. You’ve gone through a growth spurt. You’re nearly as tall as your parents.”

Saniel nodded. “According to one of my classes this past winter, I would do so and it would be the last big one. I will continue to grow a little bit more over the next couple of years. Too slow for me.” (drooptail)

Carulin gigglechittered. “Ah, yes, our Saniel is in a hurry to grow up. He would also rather be a cousin squirrel than a citizen one.”

Saniel flicked his tail up and down once as a cousin squirrel would in agreement while nodding enthusiastically. He then pointed to their small backpacks with his tail. “May I help you with your bags, Dr. Kaynobble and Ms. Butternut?”

Before they could respond, loud excited chittering echoed through the trees. A gray blur quickly scrambled down Jessophat’s tree, leapt from it clearing Jessophat’s head, and embracing Raoul in a tight hug, nearly barreling him over.

“I’m happy you arrive safe!” Pinecone chittered. She then hugged Butternut warmly. They briefly sniffed each other.

“We’re happy to see you, too,” Raoul responded for the two of them. He looked about. “Where are Aldin and your pups?”

Pinecone replied, “Pups scared.” She drooped her tail. “A fox hunt/killed a squirrel pup at far cherry grove seven days ago. They scared to come down. Fear fox will come here.”

“Has fox predation been a problem?” Raoul asked.

Pinecone wigwagged her tail left to right to left again in the negative. She pulled her flatpanel off her back and quickly typed. The panel read her words for her. "Need more words. This was the first fox attack this year and the third squirrel to die since the colony was formed. One pup fell from high up. Another was taken by a predator bird. The squirrel taken seven days ago was one of this year's pups, Sorel. She was with five others planting cherry pits to expand the grove." Pinecone drooped her tail. "Her parents are devastated. The pup who fell had also been one of theirs. They have one pup left from this spring's litter." She sighed and continued in chitterspeak. "Friend coaxing our pups. Try explain fox fear Biggens. Is safe here. Fox will no hunt them here near Kind's tree. They come soon."

"I could go help!" Saniel eagerly offered.

Pinecone glanced at Saniel and typed a response on her flat panel. "No, they need to do this on their own, young Saniel."

"Even Blossom?"

"Especially Blossom," Pinecone typed-answered, her tail starting to whirl in circles multiple times in agitation.

"Come Saniel," his mother jumped in. "You offered to carry our guests' bags. You can then help me prepare supper for our guests."

Saniel only hesitated a moment before taking Raoul's and Butternut's bags and brought them into the guest quarters before following his mother up the huge butternut tree.

Pinecone shook her head like a citizen squirrel would. She continued to type. "He's smitten with Blossom. She doesn't discourage him." She drooped her tail.

Jessophat nodded. "As much as I and Carulin hate to do it, we're going to send him off for senior school in Rock City rather than have him learn remotely in order to separate them before they can get into 'trouble'. He'll be sexually mature by the end of the fall harvest as he'll be twelve then."

Pinecone whirled her tail again, typing away on her flatpanel. "Blossom will be close behind him. Mid-winter for her just before she turns one."

(chitter, chit, chit) echoed down from the tree. "Come on you four, it's safe." Aldin made his way down the tree and embraced both Raoul and Butternut, nuzzling the latter, before doing likewise to his mate. He looked back-up. "See, it's safe."

Slowly and hesitantly, four two-season old, three-quarter grown cousin squirrels made their way down the tree and gathered near their parents. They hesitantly looked past them at the newcomers.

Aldin pointed to each of them in turn with his tail, "Cloud, Twig, Blossom, and Chatter meet Dr. Raoul Kaynobble and his mate, Butternut."

Raoul scooted down on all four. "Come sniff," he chitterspoke. "I no bite."

The four glanced at each other and Blossom spoke for them in Common. "You can chitterspeak?"

Raoul blinked in surprise and replied in Common. "Of course, though I hadn't realized you could 'Biggenspeak'."

Aldin gigglechittered. "That part of my genes dominated in all four of them, Raoul. Though, they save it for when they speak to 'Biggens'."

"It is the polite thing to do," Twig replied. "It would not be right to speak to other cousin squirrels in 'biggenspeak' as they can't reply the same."

"Saniel," Blossom started, paused and then added, "and his parents taught us Common as much as Father."

"Pups," Pinecone chittered. "This is Curious," she pointed to Raoul with her tail.

The eyes of all four widened briefly. They quickly scurried over to the biggen raccoon and embraced him in a group hug, sniffing at the same time, all fear they had before seemed to have vanished.

"Mother has told us so much about you, but only used your chitterspeak name, Dr. Kaynobble," Chatter stated for the group.

They then embraced Butternut and looked between them and their own parents and then at each other. They each raised their tails once and nodded at Butternut.

"I guess that means you're now our second mother and farther?" All four looked expectantly at them and their parents. Raoul, Butternut and Pinecone glanced at Aldin. Eventually, all four pups stared at their father.

Aldin wigwagged his tail briefly. "I guess that's up to me, my wonderful pups. And that's why they are here to visit for the rest of the summer. They're here to see if it will work out."

They nodded accepting that answer.

"Hey, you know what that means?" Cloud asked his siblings.

"Yes, it means Elder Jessophat and Dame Carulin will have a big meal tonight for their guests!" Chatter answered.

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“Lots and lots of butternuts for us!” Twig exclaimed. “Come on, let’s go see if they need help!”

All four raced up the tree.

Jessophat shook his head in amusement. “I guess in their excitement, that they hadn’t noticed I was right here.”