

The young couple hugged and nuzzled each other. Blossom then pulled her flatpanel off her back and showed her parents the acceptance letter from Rock City Senior School.

“I’ve been studying hard every evening into the night for the past month. I want to become a doctor, specifically, a general medical practitioner, and return to serve here at The Refuge. That way, we won’t need to rely so much on the biggen woodchuck, Dr. Neroff, in the ‘biggen’ village. He’s good, but always needs to reach out to Dr. Territan for advice ‘cause he didn’t study cousin squirrel anatomy in college for obvious reasons. I had to interpret for a squirrel on one visit about a month back and I became fascinated with what he was doing. I started asking questions and the more I spoke to him, the more I realized it was what I wanted to do. So, I asked him what I would need to do to become a doctor. He explained I would need to attend college. To do that, I first need to attend and graduate from senior school.”

Pinecone shook her head and turned to Aldin. “Our Blossom grow up fast. She is your small biggen pup with lofty plans, Friend.”

“No, Pinecone. She is ***our*** pup with lofty plans, thinking how she can contribute to the success of our colony,” Aldin replied. “Much like how I was trying to learn physics back on Terra to help my people at Namakanta before I got sucked through some sort of doorway into this world.” He looked at his daughter. “First, Blossom, basic schooling takes six years among Citizen species to learn. Even back on Terra, it took our people a minimum of one-and-a-half intensive years to learn a basic education curriculum. How did you learn all that in just a month?”

Blossom looked down briefly scuffing a paw while drooping her tail. “I sort of cheated a little. But not like you think,” she added before her parents could react. “There are study guides for the Senior School exam. So, I concentrated on studying what I needed to learn to pass the exam. I barely passed because those guides are just guides. They don’t explain all that will be tested. They just give examples. What I didn’t study is what I didn’t do well on. If you read through the letter, you’ll see I’ll be required to take ‘remedial’ classes in addition to the normal senior school classes. My barely passing the exam was the reason for the muzzle-to-muzzle interview by flatpanel with the school master. I guess they hold such conferences for those who are borderline. I think I shocked him when he saw what species I was. His first questions were how old I was and how I learned what I learned. I think they’re going to be adjusting the study guides and the exam in the future. He had to cut the interview short and arrange for a second one. In that second interview he decided to give me a chance as their first cousin squirrel student instead of telling me to go study more and try again next term.”

“Blossom, do you truly understand what you’re getting into?” Aldin asked his daughter. “You would be the only cousin squirrel there. You’ll be lonely and scared until you can make friends. There will be all kinds of species there, including those that you’ll instinctually view as predators. Raoul here is very small compared to some of them. Look what it took for you to meet him earlier today. Biggens live differently than we do. You can’t compare it to how Jessophat, Carulin and Saniel live as they live differently from other Biggens. In addition, Citizens learn at a slower pace. Once you finish the remediation classes and start to take senior classes, you might grow bored at the pace.”

Blossom drooped her tail. "You've taught me how to deal with instinctual fear, Father. I know I'll need more practice on that. I won't be lonely as I'll have Saniel with me," she paused a moment and glanced at his parents. "Unless they change their mind and have him attend remotely or send him to a different school now." She drooped her tail. "If you read through the correspondence with the school master, you will see that they promise that, if necessary, they will try and compress the curriculum to more my learning style if I find the pace too slow and prove I can handle a faster pace. I may be able to jump ahead a full school year each term once I finish the remediation classes and depending on how I do with the normal classes."

"Saniel still needs to take and pass the entrance exam," Carulin replied. She looked at her mate.

"If he passes, we'll let him attend with you," Jessophat added. "Provided your parents let you attend."

Saniel immediately moved over to his parents and hugged them. Blossom followed suit. They both looked over at Aldin and Pinecone who were quietly conversing together. Both flicked their tails up and down once. Aldin spoke for them looking at the young couple. "We agree with Saniel's parents. If he passes the exam, we will tentatively let you attend senior school with him, Blossom."

"Tentatively?"

Aldin sighed and glanced at Butternut and Raoul. "I know you two just got here, but I'm afraid my duties as a parent will need to come first in this case." He turned back to Blossom. "I have some business to conduct in Rock City in two days that I had planned to do remotely because of our guests. Now, it will be muzzle-to-muzzle. You're coming with me. The best way to learn to interact with Biggens is to actually do it. Show you can suppress the fear as I've tried to teach you and you will be able to go to Senior School with Saniel. We'll leave tomorrow."

The young couple now hugged Aldin and Pinecone in thanks.

"It's a deal, Father." She turned to her boyfriend. "I know you will take the exam in two days, Saniel. Do you need to study more for it?" He nodded while flicking his tail up and down once. Blossom turned back to the adults. "May we be excused so I can help my boyfriend study?" After a simple nod from the adults, Blossom retrieved her flatpanel from her father, hugged him and her mother again, and let Saniel lead her to his room in the tree to do as she suggested.

Once they were out of sight and earshot, Carulin turned to Butternut and hugged her. "Thank you for helping handle that for us."

Butternut scuffed her left rear paw and looked down briefly before looking back up. "I may not have had any pups of my own, yet. But I have raised cousin squirrels I've adopted. And I was born a 'biggen', so, who better to bridge the differences between our two species?"

"And it helps put off the issue of Saniel potentially getting Blossom pregnant for several years," Jessophat added.

That got Pinecone's and Aldin's full attention. "How so," Aldin asked for the two of them.

"Among Biggens it's not unusual for young adults in senior school to experiment with coupling. So, they are required to have a long-term contraceptive embedded under the skin to ensure no pregnancy occurs. Should they decide to not wait until they are both adults to become mates, Blossom will not be endangered. Among Biggens, unlike cousin squirrels, there is more to becoming mates than just coupling. It is accepted that young adults might couple while at senior school. It's one of the reasons, a young adult must have written permission from their parents/guardians to attend."

Pinecone pulled her flatpanel off her back to look up the word, contraceptive, rather than ask. She guessed the spelling correctly on the first try and read through the term. Her eyes widened briefly as she read how there were different versions. The male version kills the seed. The female version prevents her eggs from implanting in the uterus should they become fertilized. "Biggens can be strange. Choose to mate while not wanting pups," she muttered. She closed her eyes and thought for a moment. She tucked the flatpanel back on her back as she opened her eyes and flicked her tail up and down once. "I agree, it's better they in Biggen school together than stay here. It's safer for Blossom should she choose to lead Energy on a mate chase through the trees before he see ten and six winters."

Aldin flicked his tail up and down once in agreement.

All were quiet for a moment. Raoul glanced at the entrance noting the long shadows. "It's getting near sunset. It's early for me, but I know Butternut isn't the night owl she once was when she was a 'Biggen'." He looked at Aldin and Pinecone. "Will you two be joining us tonight? After all, those two," he pointed in the direction the young couple had scampered off in, "aren't the only ones 'dating' here." He chuckled.

Aldin glanced at his mate and turned to the other two. "We will, but we need to go talk to our other pups first so they are in the loop about how we feel about Blossom and Sanial." He turned to their hosts. "Thank you for dinner."