

“Great grandsire Curious, bend it just a little more,” Night encouraged Raoul on. “Good. Hold it there!”

As Raoul held the now bent large branch in place, Eve and Swift quickly wove other smaller branches around it. Tansey carefully dragged the next, nearly too big for her branch up the tree trunk in her mouth, and then held it out for Raoul to take next.

“Slowly release,” Night commanded. Raoul slowly relaxed his grip on the larger branch. The other smaller branches held it in place. He accepted the next large branch from Tansey, thanking her in the process. The drey slowly took shape, big enough for a biggen raccoon and three cousin squirrels to share.

Butternut watched not daring to jump into the fray. She was amazed at how well Raoul interacted with their adopted great grandpups. He appeared to be enjoying himself as the pups taught him how to build a drey. And they were doing a good job of it too from what she could see watching from the next tree over. As she watched the construction progress, a gray squirrel landed on the branch next to her.

“You are Butternut?” the other chattered, raising its tail in a curl briefly.

Butternut flicked her tail up and down once as she looked at the gray squirrel with rounded ears. She looked like Pinecone but appeared to be a bit older. “I am. You are?”

“Tassel, head of the Council of Elders” she bowed. They then sniffed each other briefly before Tassel continued. “I sorry I no have time to greet you and biggen raccoon, Curious, yesterday.”

Butternut bowed in turn. “I thank you, Elder Tassel. You allow my mate and me to visit your territory.”

Tassel waved it off as she watched the organized chaos happening on the next tree over. “I know why you here.” She glanced at the drey construction. “Your mate is good with pups. Is too bad he no squirrel.”

Again, Butternut flicked her tail up and down once. “He like squirrel inside, Elder Tassel. Biggens chose one thing study much about. Curious choose study smart squirrels.”

“Teacher speak to me about your mate, Butternut. He speak a lot about him. So has my pup, Pinecone.” She paused a moment watching the drey construction. “There are others you need to meet. Please follow me. They will be scared of your mate. Maybe in time, they will be less scared.” Tassel wigwagged her tail back and forth a few times. “I no blame them. He so big. Bigger than Kind and Sunshine. I scared even from here. Your great grandpups very brave. Come. Others wait.”

Not knowing if it was a request or an order and not wanting to upset the squirrel in charge of this forest, Butternut followed Tassel through the treetops. After a few ceclicks they were back near Jessophat’s and Carulin’s tree home. There were many squirrels gathered in the trees. Up front,

Teacher sat by himself. A squirrel with orangish-red fur and tasseled ears sat on a branch near Teacher. Tassel led Butternut over to Teacher. Butternut bowed to Teacher. The two of them sniffed each other briefly. Teacher then held his paws open very biggen-like and Butternut accepted his warm embrace.

Teacher looked about. "This is Butternut. Like Friend, she is a small biggen and can biggenspeak."

There was hushed chittering among some of those present, which ceased at a flick of Teacher's tail.

"Her tale is hers to speak if she chose to speak it. She and her biggen raccoon mate, Curious," he had to pause and flick his tail again for silence as others started chittering among themselves at the announcement that her mate was a biggen raccoon. Once the others fell silent again, he continued. "They are here to nest with Pinecone and Friend. They are welcome in The Refuge."

The others cheered and quickly fell silent as all seemed to glue their beady rodent eyes on Butternut. She quietly gigglechittered to herself, twitching her tail nervously. She glanced at Teacher. "I got little chose, do I?"

Teacher wigwagged his tail left to right and back once.

"Well, if it help us fit in," she said quietly to him before turning to the others and raising her voice. "I born a biggen squirrel." She then repeated it in Common. That brought a gasp from those gathered. She ignored it and continued with her tale in chitterspeak. "I see two tens and six winters as a Biggen." There were more gasps from some present who had never asked about Biggen ages. "Then accident happen. Biggens no understand. Accident make me change. I grow small, become smart squirrel. I so scared of Biggens I had called friends. I scared of my mate. I flee from him to nearby forest. There I met Teacher. He no take name yet..." There were no more interruptions as all listened to her tale. A pawspan went by as she told her life story in brief. She finished with her and Raoul's arrival at The Refuge the day before and why they had come. As she finished, there was silence among those who had listened to her.

One of the listeners stepped forward on his branch and raised his tail. Teacher indicated he may speak.

"Butternut, who once serve as Biggen Elder, I may no speak for all or I may," the male looked about briefly before continuing, his tail whipped back and forth giving away his nervousness. "I believe things happen for reason. Nimble good friend. If no for you, he would no be here. He would be dead. If no for you, Teacher would no be here. He would be dead." He drooped his tail.. "Elder Voice Friend would be dead." He gestured about with his tail. "No one of us would be here if no for you. You want pups in spring, you will have them. If Friend no make pups with you, many here will offer."

"Including you, Seed Spinner?" Someone called out. Some others giggled at the intended good nature ribbing.

Seed Spinner grabbed his tail and hid his muzzle in it a moment before releasing it and flicking it up and down once. "If Elder Butternut chose me and her first mate agree, I would." He looked about. "And so would many of you. Admit it. For all she do for us, the least we can do is make her a dame as she wish."

That seemed to settle the matter between Seed Spinner and his heckler as others called out agreement. The gathering seemed to break-up then, with many coming forward to sniff and introduce themselves to Butternut and personally welcome her. She knew she'd have a hard time trying to keep the names straight. Fortunately, each of them had a unique scent, which would help. Eventually, the only squirrels left were Teacher, Tassel, herself, and the orangish red one, who now introduced herself as Foxy.

Butternut embraced her in a hug. "I so sorry what happened to you and your people, Elder Foxy."

Foxy drooped her tail briefly. "Is bad and is good. Is bad forest burn and so many die. Is good those who survive come here. Is different. Good different than old forest."

"Foxy one my better students," Teacher struggled a little with the last term, which he learned from Aldin. "She quick learn."

"I feel I must. Old Elders keep so much from us. I angry they do that," Foxy whipped her tail back and forth in agitation. "So many no need die. Here all may learn Elder things if choose. Is good. Here we use tools that help with harvest. That good. No one will starve. We will succeed here." She flicked her tail up and down once for emphasis.

"Even if you become like small Biggens?" Butternut hesitantly asked.

Foxy flicked her tail up and down once again. It audibly slapped on the branch she was perched on. "Many die here and in my old forest following old ways. I believe we must try new ways to survive. I no care what smart squirrels in other forests think. Call us small Biggens if they chose. We smart squirrels like them. We smarter as we live in truce, work together, make whole colony strong. We smarter use tools to make harvest work easier. If my grandpups learn Biggen symbols and use Biggen viewer to speak to Biggens like Pinecone is good. More Biggens understand us the better." Foxy paused a moment. "How long you speak you visit?"

"My mate and I here only to start of harvest time."

Foxy wigwagged her tail back and forth left to right and back once in disagreement. "No, if you want pups you no leave. You must stay here through spring. If you no here through spring, you will no have pups. You must stay if you want pups. Your Biggen mate may go back to Biggens at harvest time if he chose. But if you go, you no have pups."

Butternut was shocked to silence by the obvious truth of her statement. When she and Raoul came, it was with the understanding it would only be for a few weeks. She figured come mid-

winter, Aldin would be back near them due to needing to be on call for Parliament and that's when she'd make her move and finally win him over. It never occurred to her that she may have better luck if she settled here.

"Is too soon to choose. We arrive just yesterday. Friend will be with Biggen Elders when time make pups. Is why I no think stay here through winter." She looked directly at Foxy. "You wise Elder, get me think other way."

Foxy briefly hid her muzzle in her tail at the praise. She still wasn't used to receiving praise for stating what she thought was obvious.