

Over the next few days since that first mass meeting, Butternut found that she was quickly fitting in. All she came across greeted her warmly. Some spoke briefly before being on their way. Others shared nuts and seeds and spoke at length. Some fought through their fears to speak with Raoul. They'd stare at him in wonder when Butternut explained that their size difference was an advantage in the winter as he kept her very warm when they snuggled-up. They'd then watch him blush as she describe how gentle he was with her when they "tried to make pups." Cousin squirrels were more open about the process than Biggens normally were.

Late in the afternoon the day after Aldin and Blossom went to Rock City, both of them met with Tassel, Teacher, and Foxy. Raoul and Butternut looked back and forth among the three of them. First Tassel and then Foxy nervously crept up to Raoul to sniff him. He held still for it. Teacher showed no fear having spent a lot of his recovery time from his dental work in Raoul's presence.

"This like elder meeting," Teacher spoke, "but no full elder meeting as no all Elders here. Foxy ask for meeting. She ask Tassel and I attend." He turned toward Foxy.

She whirled her tail briefly fighting down the fear. "Yes, I ask for meeting. And I still a little afraid of Curious. You so big. Is why I ask Elders Tassel and Teacher attend. Help me be less afraid." She fought down the fear and got her tail under control. "How are you, Butternut and Curious, doing here at The Refuge?" She raised her tail briefly in a curl.

Butternut glanced at Raoul. He took the cue and spoke first. "Is good so far, Elder Foxy." He bowed to her. "Have Elders Tassel and Teacher speak to you about me?"

Foxy flicked her tail up and down once. "Biggens choose one thing learn much about. You learn much about our people, smart squirrels. Butternut explain when she meet others you and she mates before she shrink into smart squirrel. You mates longer than Teacher live."

This time, Raoul did his best to wigwag his raccoon tail up and down once. Foxy noticed his attempt and appreciated it as he responded. "Yes. I learn about smart squirrels more than ten and five winters. I think I will learn more in my short time here at The Refuge than in all my previous winters learning about smart squirrels. Is easier learn when squirrels speak with you and no run away from you."

Foxy looked at Butternut. "And you?" Again, she raised her tail briefly in a curl.

"Like you speak when we last meet, is different this forest. Always at truce. Is good. All friendly. No one try chase me away. No one question why I here. All welcome me and Curious." She hugged her mate. "Some still fear Curious, but some no show fear now. Here, I have no fear of others as I do when among Biggens."

Foxy nodded. "When you speak before those who gathered to welcome you, Butternut, you speak when you Biggen you teacher. You teach Biggen things to other Biggens."

Butternut flicked her tail up and down once.

“Maybe you teach Biggen things to our people? Those who choose to learn Biggen things.”

Now Tassel spoke up. “There are pups among our people, Butternut, who are trying to learn Biggen symbols and to understand Biggenspeak on their own. Kind and Sunshine no have time to teach Biggenspeak. Our council keep Friend busy as Elder Voice to Biggens. He no have time. Many pups want to learn Biggenspeak. They want to learn Biggen things to help The Refuge. I learn this morning my grandpup Blossom want to learn to be a healer.” She whirled her tail about proudly. “Is easier for her as she can Biggenspeak like you. No so easy for others who can no Biggenspeak on own. They need learn Biggenspeak symbols to make Biggen viewer speak for them like my pup Pinecone does.”

Foxy jumped back in. “Pinecone, Kind, and Sunshine all speak to us this morning. They speak about what happened your first night here in their nest tree. How you helped them understand how things different for smart squirrels and Biggens. Who better to teach Biggen things to smart squirrels than you, Butternut? Who better prepare them for Biggen...” she paused a moment. “I think word Friend used was ‘school’. You, a smart squirrel who was a Biggen. One who know both Biggen ways and ours. When you on Biggen Elder Council, they rule smart squirrels may live with Biggens. Biggens may live with smart squirrels. We learn that include smart squirrels may go to Biggen school.”

Butternut blinked in surprise. She was silent a moment before finally replying. “You want me to teach smart squirrels basic Biggen things so they can go to,” she switched to Common for the next word and back to chitter, “Senior School like Blossom?”

All three of them flicked their tails up and down once. Raoul did his best to suppress a chuckle.

Butternut look directly at Teacher. “I am surprised you support this.”

Teacher wigwagged his tail back and forth slowly. “Biggens save my life. Foxy no only my best student. She speak good argument. Tassel agree with her first before I agree. We must work with Biggens to make the colony succeed. If our pups wish to learn Biggen things to do that, then, they should be allowed to do so.”

Butternut drooped her tail. “I must think on this.”

Tassel spoke-up. “Kind and Sunshine speak you good teacher to their pup Energy and to Blossom. You help them understand the danger if they try and make pups. You no order them. You no make them feel like young pups who know no things. You help them think like the near adults they are and realize the danger.” She paused a moment, and added, “They will leave soon, go to Biggen colony named Rock to go to school.”

Butternut sighchittered. “Is good Energy pass. Blossom now no be alone among Biggens. I know what that like. It will be hard for her. With someone she knows with her, it will no be so hard.” She turned toward Foxy. “As for what you ask Foxy and Tassel explain more, is no that I afraid that I no be good as teacher. Biggen rules is problem. I taught only one thing in special study school, what Biggens call,” she switched to Common for the next word, “college, which comes

after,” again she switched to Common, “senior school. What you ask, I must seek Biggen permission to teach. And is no because Biggens forbid. Biggen adults choose one thing to learn much about as you know. I would need learn more on how to teach those Biggen things to receive permission to teach them. What you ask me to teach is different from what I teach in,” again she changed to Common for the one word, “college. There, I teach about how our body works. All the different parts inside, such as our lungs that let us breath and our hearts that move blood around inside.” She paused. “And how pups form and grow. Is why I must think on this.” She tapped her flatpanel on her back with her tail tip. “I need to use Biggen viewer to see what the Biggen rules on teaching basic Biggen things are. It will take time. I need to know how much time before I decide.”

Teacher reached over with one of his forepaws and patted one of hers. “We no order. We ask. Take your time, Butternut. Is big ask. We know before we ask you need time. With this ask, we also are asking you and Curios to no leave The Refuge. We ask you to stay, make this your home, and make our,” he gestured at all of them including her and Raoul, “colony stronger. We ask you become teacher of basic Biggen things to help our colony grow.” The others flicked their tails up and down once in agreement with him. “We no expect you decide now.”

Butternut was moved with how they felt about her and how she and Curious were being asked to fit in after only a few days there. “As I speak, I need time.” She bowed to them in thanks. “Thank you for giving me the time I need and your faith in me.”

Teacher then looked at both her and Raoul as he continued. “Tassel and I discuss this last two days. Come mid-winter, if Friend no make pups with you, Tassel share me with you if Curious share you with me.” He looked down briefly, scuffing a paw along the branch. “This time no Biggen Elders and no smart squirrel Elders will forbid.” He nervously gigglechittered. “We now the Elders and make the rules here. Biggen Elders rule smart squirrels and Biggens may join together, same as here. This time you no scare me off using Biggenspeak speaking you small Biggen. Our ruling is the same for you as it was for Friend. You are smart squirrel like us who can Biggenspeak. If Friend no do so and if you would have me now after all these winters, I will give you pups come spring as I would have done so many winters ago two seasons after a scared what I think was very young squirrel smelling of Biggens wondered into my territory.”

Butternut was moved to near tears. She owed Teacher so much. If it weren’t for him, she’d have never survived her first summer as a cousin squirrel in his old forest. She glanced at Tassel and Raoul. Tassel flicked her tail up and down once as Raoul smiled and nodded. She then grasped Teacher’s forepaws in her own and drew him to her, embracing him. “If Friend no chase me, I promise you will,” she whispered in his ear and groomed the side of his neck briefly, causing his tail to wigwag back and forth rapidly.