

On their second day in Rock City, Aldin again led Butternut through the streets. They eventually arrived at a long, three-story stone block building on the edge of the city. "Here we are," Aldin stated leading Blossom towards the entrance.

She paused as she read the sign: Rock City Senior School. "Why are we going here, father? I don't start school until autumn."

"I figured you'd like a tour so that you can familiarize yourself with the school before you start living here. Also, the school master wants to meet you in the fur."

Blossom paused a moment nervously wigwagged her tail remembering the school master was a fisher. She swallowed hard, fought down the fear, and followed her father into the building. They followed signs leading to the school master's office and were greeted by a beaver who served as the school master's administrative assistant. He left them briefly passing through a door. After a half a ceclick, he returned and led them into the inner office. A 1.5 mit long very dark brown furred weasel-like creature stood up from behind a desk and made his way around to greet his visitors.

Blossom froze in fear in front of such a huge predator. The fisher approached her father. It could easily rip him apart and swallow him in a couple of bites. She wanted to give a warning cry, but it was frozen in her throat. The fisher crouched down and shook forepaws with Aldin. They spoke back and forth and none of it registered to her.

"Welcome, Ambassador! It is an honor to meet you! As you may have guessed seeing my name plate on the door, I am Pekan, the School Master." He crouched down and offered a forepaw in a handshake, which Aldin accepted.

"The honor is mine, School Master Pekan. I've brought my daughter for a school tour as we had arranged. This is Blossom." Aldin turned to her as he introduced her. He saw she had a glazed look in her eyes. "Blossom?" Aldin waved a paw in front of her muzzle. "Blossom?" He asked a second time, gently touching her shoulder. "Are you alright?" There was deep concern in his voice.

The touch broke her out of the fear-freeze-trance. Blossom was suddenly able to use her muscles again. Her tail wigwagged about randomly and rapidly. "I...I...can't..." she managed to fight back screaming it in fear for a moment.

Pekan backed off and scooted down on all four paws and tried to make himself look smaller.

Aldin turned to the fisher. "I need to take her outside and let her climb a tree. The survival instinct is strong in our species, School Master Pekan. She's still learning how to suppress the fear when interacting with citizen species."

"Take all the time you two need," Pekan answered. "I'm sorry I have scared you, Ms. Blossom."

That was all the permission Blossom needed. She fled from the office nearly knocking over the beaver assistant in the outer waiting room. As she reached the hallway, she nearly skidded into the opposite wall. She looked about, saw the purple exit signs and followed them out a different door on the other side of the building leaving wet paw prints in her wake. She quickly climbed up the nearest tree, screeing in fear, calling out about the predator as she climbed. In the woods, she thought she faintly heard someone else take up the call.

Aldin waited a good fifteen ceclicks before joining her. She quickly buried her muzzle into his chestfur and wept, bemoaning how badly she had failed with the occasional warning scree coming out of her every few ceclicks. He simply rocked her back and forth letting her cry it out. Another twenty or so ceclicks passed before she began to calm down.

“Don’t be too hard on yourself, my daughter. It’s more my fault than yours,” he said, while gently stroking the back of her head.

She pulled her muzzle out of his fur and looked up at her father. “What do you mean? I froze in there.”

“And rightfully so. I’m pushing you too hard too quickly. After seeing how you could handle scampering among strangers out in the open since lunch yesterday, I assumed you were ready to meet a ‘Biggen’ predator muzzle-to-muzzle. I should have delayed the school visit and taken you to some of my smaller predator friends here in the city first.”

“I was afraid of losing sight of you on the streets. That enabled me to overcome the fear of all the Biggens including predator species around us.” Blossom sniffled and wiped her eyes. “I’m willing to give it another try with the School Master.”

“Are you sure you’re ready?” Aldin asked with concern in his voice. “We could arrange to come back another day and give you more time.”

Blossom shook her head in the negative while wigwagging her tail left to right. “I must try, father. I need to do this if I am to go to school here with Saniei. You said, I could only come if I show I can suppress the fear.”

He nodded. “You’re just like your mother in that respect. Determined to overcome the instinct as quickly as you can.” He began to lead her back down the tree. “She spent 6 klicks on and off with a citizen bobcat on a flitter flight from here to the capital district. By the end she and the bobcat were good friends.” He led her back into the building.

The beaver waved them on through. This time, as they entered, Pekan moved back and got down on all four paws trying to make himself look as small as he could. Blossom scampered right over to the huge predator. She left wet paw prints across the floor. She paused directly in front of Pekan.

“School Master Pekan, I apologize for my earlier behavior. May I please sniff you? It’ll help me be less afraid.”

“Of course, my child. Do what you must. I don’t want any of my students to fear me.” He held still for her.

She sniffed him all over trying to convince herself he was no threat to her. “Have others been scared?”

“Sometimes, especially, if they are a prey-species like rabbits, woodchucks, and squirrels from one of the smaller villages.” Pekan spoke quietly. “Others tell them stories that hunting of citizens is permitted in school.” He narrowed his eyes. “Of course, it’s not allowed here just like anywhere else.”

Blossom’s tail wigwagged a bit as she fought down the urge to flee again. “May we hug?”

“Of course,” the fisher sat-up and opened his arms to the small squirrel. As she grasped the large fisher the best she could with her tiny body, he slowly brought his arms around her and hugged her gently. She sniffed him some more. As she loosened her embrace, he did likewise.

“Thank you, School Master Pekan.” Her tail began to wigwag back and forth rapidly. “Please forgive me as I must go climb a tree again. I should be alright afterward.”

The fisher nodded and Blossom fled again, but not as rapidly, leaving wet pawprints on the floor yet again.

Aldin did not follow her as he turned to Pekan. “Thank you for your patience, School Master Pekan.”

The larger fisher waved it off. “I was telling her the truth. I have scared others before. My wild cousins hunt your kind after all. It’s understandable why she’s afraid of me as I’m much bigger than the wild cousin version of my species.”

“And my daughter needs to work through those fears if she’s to attend school here.”

“I haven’t received a signed consent form for her yet.”

Aldin drooped his tail. “My mate remains hesitant but will approve if I approve. I have a few questions I’d like answered before I consent.”

The fisher raised an eyebrow and gestured Aldin to a cushion. He sat on a similar one. The beaver came in and set a tray of water and tea on a nearby table. Pekan poured himself a mug of tea. He gestured and Aldin indicated he’d like water. The fisher handed him a glass of water and sat back down, mug in his forepaws. He gave Aldin his full attention. Aldin, in turn, had to call up every trick he knew to keep the fear instincts at bay. He knew Pekan was no threat to him. But subconsciously, his instincts wanted him to flee due to how Pekan watched him waiting for him to speak. This predator could eat him in just two bites. Why was he so close to him? Pekan suddenly showed concern on his muzzle.

“Are you alright, Ambassador?”

Aldin drooped his tail. “I will be in a moment, unless you suddenly jump up off your cushion, School Master. As I said, the self-preservation instinct is strong in cousin squirrels. I am just as scared as my daughter. But I’ve had more practice at tamping it down.”

Pekan slowly nodded trying to not make any sudden movements, giving Aldin time to gather his thoughts.

“Why are you offering to accept Blossom a semester early? I looked-up the minimum age for senior school. It’s twelve, the age when citizen species reach sexual maturity. The smart squirrel equivalent is roughly ten months/one year¹. Blossom is six months old.”

Pekan nodded and sipped his tea. “When I had asked for a video meeting with Blossom, I had thought she might have been the younger sister of the citizen squirrel, Saniel, who lives at The Refuge. The intention for the meeting was to break the bad news to his little sister that she was too young to attend and ask her try again when she was older and had completed basic school.”

“I take it that has happened before?” Aldin raised his tail briefly in a curl.

Pekan nodded. “More often than you think. A younger sibling who is not ready for their older sibling to leave and they want to follow immediately. I was shocked when a cousin squirrel faced me through the camera, and one who could speak our language.” He took another sip of his tea. “I was shocked a second time to learn she was just over five months old, which makes her about six or seven years to a citizen youth if I understand the aging difference between cousin squirrels and citizens.”

Aldin nodded. “Close. She’s the equivalent of about nine now.” He closed his eyes for a moment. “But she’s showing a maturity beyond her age in some areas. As such, it’s not so easy to compare ages between cousins and citizens.”

Pekan nodded. “Your daughter must have inherited some of your charisma, Ambassador. She can be quite persuasive. She seems brilliant for her young age. And she shows a lot of potential. The fact that she only spent a month learning enough of the basic curriculum on her own to barely pass the entrance exam,” Pekan shook his head slowly remembering he shouldn’t move suddenly and spook Aldin. “It’s unheard of. And she explained how she did it, which helps those of us who oversee the various senior schools understand how all those younger siblings in the past have been doing it. I had to excuse myself and arrange a second call with your daughter. I needed to discuss her situation with others in our field at the other senior schools. They agreed with me that she’d be better off here now, even if she’s underage and needs to finish up the basic curriculum first. That is why I agreed to let her attend a semester early, Ambassador. Also, due to her cooperation we’ll be making changes to who can access the study guides and the entrance

¹ The New Earth year is 350.4 days long, split into 10 months of 35 days each. An extra day is added every few years.

exam for future semesters and, hopefully, cut down on younger siblings barely passing something they shouldn't be ready to take yet."

"And her being my daughter had nothing to do with the decision to let her attend early?"

Pekan held his left forepaw over his heart. "Who a potential student's parents are has no influence on the decision as to whether we will or won't accept a student with a borderline score."

Aldin nodded. "Very well. When I return to my mate, we'll sign the necessary consent form."

There was a brief scratching at the door. It opened and Blossom reentered. This time she scampered with purpose in her leaps over by her father. She barely left pawprints.

"Welcome back, Ms. Blossom," Pekan greeted.

She bowed slightly. "Thank you, School Master Pekan. I'm recovered now. I shouldn't have another panic attack." She wigwagged her tail back and forth once. "Hopefully, anyway."

"Excellent. Well, if you feel my presence isn't too much for you, I'll personally give you a tour of our school."