

Day three in Rock City started with a trip to the bank where Aldin set up an account for Blossom. New accounts need to be done in person so the new account holder can have their retina and pawprint scanned. He arranged for her to receive a credit allowance each month from his account into hers to use while at school.

From there, they made their way to the specialist doctor's office. The wait was short before the doctor was ready to see Blossom. Blossom was fascinated by the various tools and instruments Dr. Zsohei had in her exam room. She fully cooperated with the female citizen ferret. Her curiosity about what the ferret needed to do to examine her kept her fear at bay. In return, Dr. Zsohei was thrilled to have a patient so positively curious about the process. Many of those who sought her out had more serious problems than Blossom's issue, which was simple in comparison. She was still a child. It was no issue for the ferret to provide the necessary contraceptive waiver for her. Dr. Zsohei didn't need to spend more than a couple ceclicks to make that determination. However, the "exam" took them close to a full klick as Blossom wanted to know what each instrument in the exam room was for. The ferret was quite happy to share her knowledge with the young cousin squirrel with the lofty dreams of becoming a doctor. As they exited the exam room and back out into the waiting room, Dr. Zsohei let both Blossom and her father know she'd send off the waiver to the senior school shortly.

Aldin and Blossom thanked the ferret and departed. A little way down the street, he turned and entered a store. She followed. He selected a small backpack that fit him and filled it with butternuts. He brought it to the clerk out front who weighed it and scanned a code on a tag on the backpack. Aldin placed his paw on a scanner and they left. He turned in the direction of the school, backpack on his back.

"Father, Dr. Zsohei said she'd send the waiver over. We don't need to deliver it ourselves."

"I'm aware, Blossom. We're not done here in Rock City yet." He paused a moment. "Well, technically, we are, but we need to visit some neighbors of the school." He turned to her. "There are cousin squirrels in the forest near the school."

Blossom's eyes shot wide a moment as she recalled she thought she had heard another squirrel behind the school the day before as she screed in fear in the trees after first meeting School Master Peka.

"We need to pay our respects to their elder," Aldin continued. "I warn you; they live as most cousin squirrels do. As you know, our colony is very different from how other cousin squirrels live. There is no constant truce in most forests. Each squirrel defends his or her territory. Their elder does not accept Teacher as Eldest Elder. We may not be welcomed and chased off. But we still need to try."

"If this elder might not welcome us, why would we go see him?"

"While at school, if you need to climb for the sake of climbing, where are you going to do it?" He watched as where she would need to do so dawned on her as her eyes shot wide a moment in understanding. "We must seek permission for you to do so." He pulled his flatpanel off his back

from under the pack and checked the time to confirm what he sensed by the angle of the sun. He sighchittered before adding, "And provided he listens to us, by the time we wrap-up with him we'll probably need to spend another night here."

He led her to the edge of the forest. He stashed his flatpanel in a hollow in an oak tree at the very edge of the forest. He indicated Blossom to do likewise. He pulled his earbuds out and also stashed them with the flatpanels. "This elder does not allow most Biggen tools in his forest."

"What about the backpack?"

"I'm hoping he'll forgive that when we offer to share food with him." He led her through the tree canopy.

Once they were deep enough into the forest to no longer be within sight of the school, a male squirrel challenged them.

"My territory! You leave or I bite!"

Aldin and Blossom held still. Aldin spoke. "We ask for truce. We seek Elder."

"Why?" It glared at them and then stared at the strange thing attached to his back. It chittered nervously. "Biggen thing."

"Come sniff, then you know why. You no bite, we no bite."

The squirrel briefly sniffed them over and his eyes shot wide as his tail began to whip about. He turned tail and fled through the trees calling out, "BIGGENS!" as he went. "TRUCE! FLEE! BIGGENS IN FOREST!"

Blossom watched the retreating squirrel. She was shocked by his reaction. Her tail began to wigwag at the warning scree he called out as he fled. Her father's tail also wigwagged. In the distance, they heard others take up the warning chatter.

"We've spent three days among 'biggens', Blossom. And I am caring a 'biggen thing' attached to my back. As such, as far as they're concerned, we're 'biggens'. Come, I know approximately where the Elder's territory is from my previous trip here early last winter with your mother and Teacher. Thanks to that one's fleeing and calling out warning, I don't think any others will challenge us as we cross their territories."

No other squirrels challenged them as Aldin predicted, but Blossom caught them being watched as they passed through other squirrels' territories. A head quickly ducking in a drey here. Scrabbling as one circled around a tree to not be seen there. It made her nervous.

Suddenly, a squirrel with a nicked left ear dropped onto a branch in front of them. It wigwagged its tale and chittergrowled at them. "Biggens no welcome here. Be gone or I bite!"

Aldin bowed to the squirrel. "I know you no welcome us, Elder. I also know you know who I am."

(chatterspit) "You with the bit tail come with female and the other Elder last winter. Speak how Biggen Elders change rules among Biggens. Forbid Biggens hunt squirrels. You now Elder Voice from forest where that Elder, the false one who claims to be Eldest Elder, lives. Why he send you here?"

"He no send me. I come to speak to you for myself and my pup." He pointed to Blossom with his tail. "I do bring message from my Elder. His instructions were to deliver it if I find you and you listen."

"I have little time for you, small Biggen. Speak quick."

"You are teaching another squirrel Elder things for after you die?"

The elder flicked his tail up and down once.

"My pup will soon go to biggen learning place at the edge of your forest to learn biggen things much like the one you teach learns Elder things."

"Why?" The Elder held his tail in a curl briefly.

Blossom spoke up. "My people too dependent on Biggens, Elder."

The elder glared at her and then back at Aldin. "Your pup must learn to only address Elders when spoken to."

Blossom bowed her head. "I ask forgiveness, Elder. I did not inform you our Elders teaching me Elder things."

The Elder's eyes shot wide.

"How old are you, pup?"

"This my first summer."

"How is it you learn Elder things already?"

Blossom looked to her father and back at the Elder. "That long tale, Elder. I will speak if you give us time so I may speak it fully. My sire bring food in Biggen tool on his back. We share food while I speak."

The Elder flicked his tale up and down once. As the sun passed through nearly three pawspans Blossom explained the history of The Refuge, starting with what happened to her mother when she first sought to establish her own territory and her banishment. How she went to speak to the

Biggen Elders. The daytime owl attacks. How the survivors had to depend on a Biggen squirrel to survive that winter. How they chose to become more like Aldin's people. The Biggen squirrel, his mate, and pup choosing to join their colony, building and living in a drey in the summer just like smart squirrels. The others who joined them including those who survived the fire in the other forest. How their Elders ruled that all who wished to learn Elder things may, so that should another disaster strike, the eldest of the survivors would be ready to lead. She wrapped-up with how they continued to live in the forest in truce, using Biggen tools as needed.

"You may no approve of our ways, Elder. Old ways no protect us from night predator bird. Old ways no protect us from fire. We have changed, choosing new ways as old ways no work for us. I chose stop learning Elder things. Many others learning Elder things. Instead, I will learn healer things from Biggens. I will take what I learn back to my people and teach others healer things just as you teach Elder things. It take many seasons like how long it take to learn all Elder things. We then no need depend on Biggens for healer. Is good when we no need depend so much on Biggens."

The elder turned back to Aldin. "Your pup wise beyond her seasons, Elder Voice. Is good to no depend on Biggens. Again, I ask, why you here?"

"My pup must live among Biggens to learn healer things. She both smart squirrel and small Biggen. She needs territory to forage in."

The elder gigglechittered. "The female you were with here last winter her dame?"

Aldin flicked his tail up and down once. "Her dame smart squirrel. She one who speak to Biggen Elders. She why Biggen Elders rule Biggens no hunt smart squirrels anymore."

The elder flicked his tail up and down once. He turned to Blossom. "You may claim the territory closest to Biggen place. No one in our forest goes within sight of Biggen place. No one claim that territory. Is yours now." He stamped a hind paw on the branch. "You stay in sight of Biggen place. You no seek mate in our forest. You no teach Biggen things to our people." His tail lashed about.

"I no approach your people unless asked, Elder. I will no speak of Biggen things to your people. I have a potential mate among our people and no need seek one here. I will stay within sight of Biggen learning place." She bowed to the elder in thanks.

Again, the elder flicked his tail up and down. "Good. Now, leave."

"One more thing, Elder," Aldin stated. "You no accept Teacher as Eldest Elder. I still bare message from him to you, one forest elder to another as I first spoke before you ask why my pup learn Elder things so soon. There are some bad Biggens out there. They burn a forest far from here as my pup speak. We took in the survivors. They survive fire like in old origin story. They hide in woodchuck holes."

"See, Biggen word no meaning."

“Is no like that, Elder. These Biggens disobey their Elders. Biggen Elders very angry as you would be if smart squirrels here broke the rules of your forest. Biggen Elders order a hunt for the bad Biggens who burn the forest. Biggens usually no hunt other Biggens. Elders must be very angry to order a hunt of other Biggens. They no catch the bad Biggens yet. When bad Biggens are caught and if they survive, Biggen Elders place them in trap for the rest of their life. Biggen Elders order all Biggens stay out of smart squirrel forests until bad Biggens are caught and punished. Biggens may only enter a smart squirrel forest if they ask permission from smart squirrels and smart squirrels give permission. Elder Teacher ask me speak to you and tell you what is happening. Though you no accept him as Eldest Elder, he still want you to know as a smart squirrel Elder what is happening among Biggens. Especially, as you live close to Biggens.”

“That is why you ask permission for your pup to enter edge of forest?”

Aldin and Blossom both flicked their tails up and down once. “She is both smart squirrel and small Biggen. As such, she must follow rules of both smart squirrels and Biggens. Permission is needed as Biggen Elders rule.”

“Biggen Elders wise. Is good rule. As I speak already, your pup may claim the area near biggen place as her territory. You go now.” He stamped a rear paw against the branch.