

Aldin and Blossom wasted no time making their way back. No other squirrels challenged them as they went. They were soon back at the oak in what was now Blossom's territory and retrieved their flatpanels and his earbuds. He slipped them back in his ears.

"Well, that went better than I expected," he said. "You did well, Blossom. As the Elder praised, you are wise beyond your seasons."

Blossom blushed at the praise. She then asked, "Why did you take the earbuds out, father?"

Aldin gigglechittered. "For my safety, hon. We went deep into the forest. There could have been predators about. If anyone cried out a warning, I needed to be able to hear it. I'm just thankful that we both were able to ignore that initial warning cry from the poor squirrel we scared when he sniffed us." He looked up at the sun. It was low in the sky. He drooped his tail. "And as I feared that meeting took a long time. Even if we left this moment, we wouldn't get back home until well after dark, which you know wouldn't be safe for us. We'll have to spend another night here in Rock City."

Blossom drooped her tail. She missed having Saniel snuggled up to her. Her stomach rumbled as she had only eaten a few of the nuts, most of which had been eaten by the Elder. She couldn't talk and eat. Aldin heard the rumble of her stomach and drooped his tail again as he searched in vain in the now empty backpack knowing his daughter was hungry.

"I'm sorry, hon. They've all been eaten. For someone so against Biggen things, that Elder was more than happy to help himself to most of the butternuts." He shrugged. "We shall go get something to eat before we go back to the inn. Do you want to get more butternuts?"

Blossom shook her head in the negative while swishing her tail left to right and back once.

"Well, then, what would you like?" Aldin lifted his tail up briefly in a curl.

She looked down a moment, scuffing a paw on the tree branch and then back up. "I'd like another pizza, Father. Also, as we must spend another night here, I'd like to come back here tomorrow morning before we go home and quickly explore my new territory."

Aldin grinned widely at his daughter. He offered to hug her and she accepted the embrace warmly. "We can do both of those, hon. Come, let's go get a pizza like you want." Aldin pulled his flatpanel off his back briefly and tapped a few things on it before sticking on his back again. "I've just given you some more credits so that you can pay for dinner. It'll get you some practice in the process and it'll let us see if they scanned your paw correctly at the bank this morning. Tomorrow morning, first thing, we'll explore your new territory. We can be home by early afternoon." He led the way down the tree, around the school building, and through the streets back to Jochen's.

As they returned to their room at the inn, Blossom's flatpanel buzzed. She answered the incoming call as Aldin headed for the bathroom. Her muzzle lit up with delight as she saw Saniel on the screen. "Just a moment, Saniel. I want to get comfortable." Blossum hooked her panel to her fur and leaped-up onto the hammock, sprawled-out on her stomach and then pulled the panel back around in front of her. "There, go ahead."

"I passed!" Saniel exclaimed.

"That's wonderful!" Blossom exclaimed back. "I'm so happy for you." She then drooped her tail, which Saniel could see through the camera. "We won't be home until tomorrow afternoon."

Now Saniel drooped his tail. "How come?"

"Where should I start?" She began to tell him about her trip with her father.

Soon after, Aldin exited the bathroom. He saw her sprawled out in the hammock talking to her flatpanel. He peaked in over her shoulder and waved to Saniel. He briefly groomed the back of his daughter's neck affectionately which elicited a giggle from Saniel on screen.

"Father!"

"Don't stay up too late, hon. We've got a long day tomorrow. You'll see him tomorrow afternoon." He glanced at the screen. "Don't keep her up too late, Saniel." He then leapt over to the other hammock. He pulled his flatpanel off his back and placed a brief call to Pinecone letting her know they'd return the following afternoon. He set it on the night stand next to the hammock, curled-up, and quickly fell asleep as his daughter continued to quietly speak with Saniel about her adventures.

Pinecone set her flatpanel aside and snuggled alongside Butternut and against Raoul after informing them that Aldin would return the following afternoon. She was quickly asleep. Raoul gently brushed two fingers along her fur and then in Butternut's.

"I think I'm beginning to enjoy this, hon," he whispered to Butternut.

"Well, there's plenty of you to go around, Raoul," she whispered back.

"I was so busy today talking to others and overseeing the contractors. I never got to ask you how your studying is going?"

"I went ahead and took the exam earlier today. I passed it," Butternut chittered quietly.

"That's wonderful, hon," Raoul praised.

Butternut sighchittered. "But I might not be able to teach the way the others want me to."

“What do you mean?”

“Education rules. Among citizens/biggens, the teacher to student ratio is a maximum of 1 to 20, preferably 1 to 15. We have a lot more than 20 pups who wish to learn the basic curriculum. And then what happens after next spring?”

Raoul gently stroked the back of Butternut’s neck without disturbing Pinecone’s sleeping form. “Take one day at a time, hon. Explain it to the Elders. Maybe they’ll think of something. Who knows.”

“Yes, you’re probably right, Raoul.” Butternut whispered back. “You’ve always been my anchor. I’m not sure how I got along without you while I lived in Teacher’s old forest.” She brushed her tail along his arm. “Goodnight, hon.”

“Night, love.”