

Teacher, Foxy, Tassel, Pinecone, and Jessophat sat in a semi-circle in Jessophat's home tree in front of his large wall-mounted flatpanel. Butternut and Raoul sat behind them. All faced the flatpanel. On the screen were a group of five citizens, beaver, otter, ferret, squirrel, and badger. The five represented the Central Lakes and Forests Region's education governing board. Greetings were exchanged with Jessophat explaining he would provide translation for the squirrels of The Refuge. The squirrel on screen agreed to do likewise at her end as needed.

Tassel glanced at Foxy to lead the discussion. Foxy nervously took a couple steps forward and addressed the citizen creatures. As she chattered, Jessophat translated and clarified as necessary.

"Our pups wish to learn hear Biggenspeak, learn Biggenspeak symbols, and then learn basic Biggen things." Jessophat added to the translation, our children wish to learn 'Biggenspeak' as they call our common language using a flatpanel to speak for them as most do not have the proper vocal cords of citizen species. Once they understand Biggenspeak, they wish to learn the basic citizen education."

Foxy nodded in thanks to Jessophat as she was starting to get a grasp of Biggenspeak and understood the gist of his translation. However, she still wasn't as good at understanding it as the others on the Elder Council.

"We ask Butternut," she pointed to Butternut with her tail, "to teach our pups. She can both Biggenspeak and chitterspeak. She born Biggen. Suffer accident turn her into smart squirrel. She live with smart squirrels six winters. She return and serve on your Elder Council. After we ask, she learn teach rules. She pass test to teach. Teach rules state can have no more than two tens students in class." Foxy drooped her tail. "We have three tens pups who wish learn. Others might ask to learn. And we will have more next summer ready to learn. Butternut have suggestion. I let her speak on suggestion."

Butternut stepped forward and Foxy moved back to her previous place. She addressed the board in Common. Jessophat quietly translated it into chitterspeak mostly for Foxy's benefit.

"First, thank you," she bowed slightly towards the screen, "for agreeing to meet with us on short notice."

"The pleasure is ours, former Representative Butternut," the otter spoke for his group. "We have already reviewed your background and seen your test score. We can see how you are uniquely qualified for this request. What do you propose?"

"I will hold two separate classes, possibly three if necessary, each day. One in the morning and one in the afternoon. Or if I must go to three, morning, midday, and late afternoon. In this way, I can accommodate all the youth who wish to learn. Cousin squirrels grow and mature quicker than citizen species. They also learn what they must learn to survive quickly. At five months they are mostly on their own. In some forests they start to raise families of their own at one year. Here, they are strongly encouraged to wait until they are two before starting a family. I suspect they will also learn what I will teach at a quicker pace. I point to the recent senior school testing

incident here in which Blossom Busheytail barely passed the senior school entrance exam after studying on her own for only a month with no formal schooling.”

Some on the screen leaned into each other whispering for a moment. The otter broke it up quickly. He glanced at the screen. “My apologies for the disruption, Dr. Gowandle.” He seemed to emphasize her doctorate degree to remind the others of her background. “I know you prefer to go by Butternut, Dr. Gowandle, but I think some of my colleagues need to be reminded about your educational background. Please continue.” He looked at the others again. “Hopefully, there will be no further interruptions.”

Butternut bowed briefly. “I propose that I start by teaching them the basics of Common, both spoken and written. They will learn to use a flat panel to speak for them, much as Elder Pinecone behind me,” she pointed to Pinecone with her tail, “can do. Once they demonstrate an understanding of Common, I will teach the basic curriculum in a condensed format. They already know some portions of it.”

“How?” Interrupted the ferret. The otter glared at him for interrupting.

“It’s alright,” Butternut responded. “And a reasonable question. At the ruling of our head elder, Tassel,” she indicated Tassel with her tail, “all who wish to learn ‘Elder smart squirrel things’ may do so. Elder Teacher,” she pointed to him with her tail, “has been busy since last winter doing just that. As he stated in Parliament, Elder smart squirrels know things that have been kept from others they oversee in most forests. Normally, they pass their knowledge onto one or two others who would succeed them upon their death. Due to Tassel’s ruling, many of The Refuge’s pups have been in attendance along with the adults in Teacher’s classes. I suspect it would take several clicks,” she glanced at him as he flicked his tail up and down once, “for him to briefly go over what he has covered with them these past five or six months. He will continue to teach what he knows to any and all who wishes to learn with him. Everything one needs to know to be a leader in the forest. Neither Elders Tassel nor Foxy were not prepared to become Elders when disaster forced leadership onto them. That is why Elder Tassel ruled that all who wish to learn Elder things may do so. That way should another disaster strike, the eldest of those who survive will be ready to lead. Ambassador Aldin, when he is here, has taught about ‘Biggen’ things when asked. Most recently, he explained the banking credit system. Another example is cousin smart squirrel parents teach their young about the reproduction process when they are one season old, roughly,” Butternut paused a moment in thought while slowly wigwagging her tail, “the equivalent of say five or six years old among citizen species.”

That drew some looks of surprise from members of the education board. The ferret nodded. “Very well, please pardon my interruption, Butternut.”

Butternut bowed. “As I was saying before, I will teach the basic curriculum in a condensed format as they already know portions of it. I will gladly work with your board or whomever you assign to me to ensure all that is to be taught will be taught, including the required exams. How long that will take, we’ll see.” She drooped her tail briefly. “However, by next summer, or more likely, next fall, I will not be able to do it all on my own. There will be too many, if we must keep the ratio at a maximum of 20 students to one teacher.”

The otter briefly responded, “We need to discuss your proposal, Butternut. I will mute at my end.”

“We’ll do likewise,” Jessophat replied.

On screen the board huddled together. There appeared to be a lot of discussion. There was a raise of paws, but not unanimous with the beaver and ferret not agreeing with the others. More discussion. Another raise of paws and this time the badger did not agree with the others. The beaver joined the badger in disagreement. The otter sighed and unmuted. Jessophat did likewise.

“I apologize. We need to take this proposal further up than our regional council as we can’t come to an agreement. We agree for the most part, but this is such a unique situation that some aspects need further discussion.”

Foxy stepped forward again. “I the one who ask Butternut to do this for The Refuge. Take what time you need. We no plan to have Butternut start until after the harvest. We need all paws for harvest.”

The otter nodded and the screen went dark. Foxy’s tail drooped.

“No lose hope, Elder Foxy,” Butternut chittered. “They no say no. Is big ask we ask of Biggens to change their rules for us. We must wait. Is all.” Butternut was not so sure herself as she tried to reassure Foxy.