

PROLOGUE

Six squirrels, all one-and-a-half seasons old, sat in a tree overlooking a cherry grove of fifteen trees in five rows of three. They were resting from the long to them trip from the more populated area of The Refuge. This grove was the furthest from the center of the Refuge and had taken more than two pawspans¹ time to reach climbing through the treetops. They looked down wearily at the burn spot below them at one edge of the clearing. They remembered the story told to them by their sires and dames about how this was the spot where Elder Voice Friend had hunt/killed the owl the previous winter.

Other squirrels taking Elder Teacher's lessons to heart, that they need to help plant trees for future generations, had planted cherry pits in the other groves to expand them. They did so, even though it would be many winters before the newly planted trees would grow big enough to produce. These six half-grown pups were determined that the furthest grove would also be expanded. After a short rest, two of the squirrels split off from the others and made their way around to trees on the other edges of the clearing. Once they were in place, they wigwagged their tails.

"Clear," a squirrel called out from where he perched in a tree looking about.

"Clear," a second squirrel called out from her vantage point across the clearing.

"Clear," called a third squirrel as she looked at the other three with her and nodded to them.

The remaining three descended from their tree near the edge of the clearing. They kept clear of the burn spot several body lengths across. They made their way over to the nearest set of three trees. They then paced off ten body lengths from those trees. In turn they were each roughly ten body lengths apart from one another. They looked about and each began to quickly dig a shallow hole with their forepaws. Into the hole, each shoved a cherry pit they had carried in their mouths. They then each buried the pits, patting the soil back in place. The forest had gone quiet around them. All three looked about nervously wigwagging their tails due to the sudden lack of sound.

"CHIT! CHIT! CHITTER! SCREE!!! FOX!!!! FOX!!! FOX!!! FLEE!!!" suddenly screeed the first look-out. His warning was quickly taken up by the other two. "FOX TOWARD SUNRISE! FLEE! CHIT! CHITTER! SCREE!!!!" The three squirrels on the ground fled in different directions.

"SOREL! NO! NO TOWARD SUNRISE!" one of the watchers cried out in dread as one of the squirrels on the ground fled in confusion towards sunrise. She ran right towards the fox that was hunkered down under a bush. The fox leapt out and snapped its jaws around the young squirrel. Sorel began to cry out as the fox shook its head back and forth vigorously. Sorel ceased making noise in mid-cry and fell limp in its jaws, her neck having been snapped in the shaking. The predator then trotted back into the forest towards sunrise, its meal firmly in its mouth.

¹ One pawspan is about one klick/hour.

The others made it back up into the trees. The five gathered together and continued to scree warnings for nearly half a pawspan while hugging each other and shedding tears for their lost companion. They knew Sorel's dame and sire would be heartbroken to learn the news. They were probably also in deep trouble as none of them had asked permission to go do this without having an adult with them. A terrible lesson learned.

"Saniel? Chitter chit. Are you awake?"

Saniel yawned and poked his head out of his drey. "Blossom? What are you doing here? You know it's dangerous to be out and about after dark."

"I know. I can't sleep in my drey. I'm so scared after what happened to Sorel today."

"Yes, what happened was awful." Saniel shuddered as he briefly recalled how Pinecone's first mate, Twig, had saved him from a similar fate the summer before.

"May I join you tonight?" Blossom wigwagged her tail nervously.

Saniel didn't hesitate. "Come in, but it'll be a bit tight. I built this to fit me, not for company."

Blossom entered and snuggled into the tight space next to Saniel. "We'll make it work, I'm sure." She licked him lightly on the nose. "Thank you."

Saniel blinked in surprise as he settled back into the now very tight space within the drey with Blossom snuggled up next to him. Both were soon fast asleep, taking in each other's scent.

Come morning they quietly chatted for a while within the drey, neither wanting to leave the other's embrace. Both agreed to spend the following night together again. Saniel would spend part of the day 'repairing' his drey, making it slightly larger so the two of them would be more comfortable come nightfall.

ONE

The hovercraft silently settled to the forest floor. The door opened. A citizen raccoon and cousin squirrel stepped out. Three citizen squirrels waited for them.

"Welcome, Raoul and Butternut," Jessophat greeted. "I hope it was an uneventful trip."

"It was a good trip," Butternut answered, hugging the three citizen squirrels in turn. "I'm finally getting better at suppressing the fear."

"That's good, Elder Butternut," Saniel replied as they hugged.

“I am no longer a representative, Master Saniel.”

“I understand, Ms. Butternut, but get used to being called Elder. You served on the ‘Biggen Elder Council’ and as such, here at The Refuge, most will call you Elder.”

Raoul looked long and hard at Saniel. He was now just slightly smaller than his parents. “I didn’t realize it was you at first, Master Saniel. You’ve gone through a growth spurt. You’re nearly as tall as your parents.”

Saniel nodded. “According to one of my classes this past winter, I would do so and it would be the last big one. I will continue to grow a little bit more over the next couple of years. Too slow for me.” (drooptail)

Carulin gigglechittered. “Ah, yes, our Saniel is in a hurry to grow up. He would also rather be a cousin squirrel than a citizen one.”

Saniel flicked his tail up and down once as a cousin squirrel would in agreement while nodding enthusiastically. He then pointed to their small backpacks with his tail. “May I help you with your bags, Dr. Kaynobble and Ms. Butternut?”

Before they could respond, loud excited chittering echoed through the trees. A gray blur quickly scrambled down Jessophat’s tree, leapt from it clearing Jessophat’s head, and embracing Raoul in a tight hug, nearly barreling him over.

“I’m happy you arrive safe!” Pinecone chittered. She then hugged Butternut warmly. They briefly sniffed each other.

“We’re happy to see you, too,” Raoul responded for the two of them. He looked about. “Where are Aldin and your pups?”

Pinecone replied, “Pups scared.” She drooped her tail. “A fox hunt/killed a squirrel pup at far cherry grove seven days ago. They scared to come down. Fear fox will come here.”

“Has fox predation been a problem?” Raoul asked.

Pinecone wigwagged her tail left to right to left again in the negative. She pulled her flatpanel off her back and quickly typed. The panel read her words for her. “Need more words. This was the first fox attack this year and the third squirrel to die since the colony was formed. One pup fell from high up. Another was taken by a predator bird. The squirrel taken seven days ago was one of this year’s pups, Sorel. She was with five others planting cherry pits to expand the grove.” Pinecone drooped her tail. “Her parents are devastated. The pup who fell had also been one of theirs. They have one pup left from this spring’s litter.” She sighed and continued in chitterspeak. “Friend coaxing our pups. Try explain fox fear Biggens. Is safe here. Fox will no hunt them here near Kind’s tree. They come soon.”

“I could go help!” Saniel eagerly offered.

Pinecone glanced at Saniel and typed a response on her flat panel. “No, they need to do this on their own, young Saniel.”

“Even Blossom?”

“Especially Blossom,” Pinecone typed-answered, her tail starting to whirl in circles multiple times in agitation.

“Come Saniel,” his mother jumped in. “You offered to carry our guests’ bags. You can then help me prepare supper for our guests.”

Saniel only hesitated a moment before taking Raoul’s and Butternut’s bags and brought them into the guest quarters before following his mother up the huge butternut tree.

Pinecone shook her head like a citizen squirrel would. She continued to type. “He’s smitten with Blossom. She doesn’t discourage him.” She drooped her tail.

Jessophat nodded. “As much as I and Carulin hate to do it, we’re going to send him off for senior school in Rock City rather than have him learn remotely in order to separate them before they can get into ‘trouble’. He’ll be sexually mature by the end of the fall harvest as he’ll be twelve then.”

Pinecone whirled her tail again, typing away on her flatpanel. “Blossom will be close behind him. Mid-winter for her just before she turns one.”

(chitter, chit, chit) echoed down from the tree. “Come on you four, it’s safe.” Aldin made his way down the tree and embraced both Raoul and Butternut, nuzzling the latter, before doing likewise to his mate. He looked back-up. “See, it’s safe.”

Slowly and hesitantly, four two-season old, three-quarter grown cousin squirrels made their way down the tree and gathered near their parents. They hesitantly looked past them at the newcomers.

Aldin pointed to each of them in turn with his tail, “Cloud, Twig, Blossom, and Chatter meet Dr. Raoul Kaynobble and his mate, Butternut.”

Raoul scooted down on all four. “Come sniff,” he chitterspoke. “I no bite.”

The four glanced at each other and Blossom spoke for them in Common. “You can chitterspeak?”

Raoul blinked in surprise and replied in Common. “Of course, though I hadn’t realized you could ‘Biggenspeak’.”

Aldin gigglechittered. “That part of my genes dominated in all four of them, Raoul. Though, they save it for when they speak to ‘Biggens’.”

“It is the polite thing to do,” Twig replied. “It would not be right to speak to other cousin squirrels in ‘biggenspeak’ as they can’t reply the same.

“Saniel,” Blossom started, paused and then added, “and his parents taught us Common as much as Father.”

“Pups,” Pinecone chittered. “This is Curious,” she pointed to Raoul with her tail.

The eyes of all four widened briefly. They quickly scurried over to the biggen raccoon and embraced him in a group hug, sniffing at the same time, all fear they had before seemed to have vanished.

“Mother has told us so much about you, but only used your chitterspeak name, Dr. Kaynobble,” Chatter stated for the group.

They then embraced Butternut and looked between them and their own parents and then at each other. They each raised their tails once and nodded at Butternut.

“I guess that means you’re now our second mother and farther?” All four looked expectantly at them and their parents. Raoul, Butternut and Pinecone glanced at Aldin. Eventually, all four pups stared at their father.

Aldin wigwagged his tail briefly. “I guess that’s up to me, my wonderful pups. And that’s why they are here to visit for the rest of the summer. They’re here to see if it will work out.”

They nodded accepting that answer.

“Hey, you know what that means?” Cloud asked his siblings.

“Yes, it means Elder Jessophat and Dame Carulin will have a big meal tonight for their guests!” Chatter answered.

“Lots and lots of butternuts for us!” Twig exclaimed. “Come on, let’s go see if they need help!”

All four raced up the tree.

Jessophat shook his head in amusement. “I guess in their excitement, that they hadn’t noticed I was right here.”

TWO

(chitter, chit, chit!) A reddish brown tassel-eared squirrel raced down the tree. It leapt at and embraced Butternut and she warmly returned the embrace. “Granddame Butternut!” Nimble excitedly chattered. “Is true. You come the long way to The Refuge to visit.”

Butternut flicked her tail up and down once as they let go of each other. “Yes, your Grandsire Curious and I come visit.”

Raoul did his best to wag his tail in greeting. A citizen raccoon’s tail muscles aren’t as complex as a cousin squirrel’s. Nimble came over to him and only nervously wigwagged his tail a little.

“I know you no threat to me, Grandsire Curious. Is still hard to fight the fear.” They hugged. “Welcome to The Refuge.”

“Where are your mates and pups?” he asked.

Nimble chattered something inaudible before continuing. “They scared of you, Grandsire. They no used to Biggens around other than Kind, Sunshine, and Energy. You are much bigger Biggen, twice as tall as Elder Kind,” he looked over to Jessophat and bowed slightly. “I try to coax them.”

Nimble scurried back up the tree. They heard a bunch of chittering back and forth.

“I’ll back off so that they might come down and meet you at least, hon,” Raoul offered as he backed off several mits².

After several ceclicks³, three other adult cousin squirrels followed Nimble down. Introductions were made. All sniffed each other and then they each embraced Butternut. She praised all three of them, especially Shadow for his black fur. Raoul got down on all four paws again. Lily, Buttercup, and Shadow nervously approached him with Nimble leading and encouraging them on. Eventually, they sniffed him. Raoul chitterspoke to them quietly so as to not spook them too badly, though they jumped a bit in surprise when he chattered fluently.

“See, I no bite. I no hunt my grandpups.”

The three of them stared at him briefly.

“Grandsire Curious good biggen,” Nimble stated.

“You call us grandpups?” Shadow asked for the others.

Raoul moved his tail up and down once. “Yes. My mate, Butternut, adopt you as her grandpups. She my mate. Makes you my grandpups.”

² Mit-meter

³ Ceclick-minute

Buttercup moved back towards the tree and chittered up into the canopy. “Come, pups! Is safe. Meet your great granddame and great grandsire.” She looked towards Nimble. “I use right names?” Her tail curled briefly.

Nimble flicked his tail up and down once.

Slowly and hesitantly, four season-and-a-half old, nearly half-grown pups made their way down the tree trunk. They first made their way to Butternut. They all sniffed each other before she embraced each of them as Buttercup introduced them. She pointed with her tail to the all-black male one first who looked just like Shadow right down to the tasseled ears. “This is Night. Night, this is your great granddame, Butternut.” She then pointed to a female whose fur was a mixture of black and peppery-gray with rounded ears, “Eve...” She then pointed to a male with fur a mixture of peppery-gray and reddish brown and tasseled ears, “Swift...”. She finally pointed to the other female who looked exactly like her with her rounded ears and peppery-gray fur. “Tansey...” It was quickly obvious to Butternut who was the father of which pup for all but Tansey.

It took a bit more coaxing to get the pups to meet Raoul. They were also surprised when he chitterspoke to them quietly and kindly, praising each of their fur patterns. It was only then that the pups noticed Jessophat, Pinecone, and Aldin. All four wigwagged their tails at the Elders in greetings and then glanced at each other.

“With Great Granddame and Great Grandsire visiting, you know what that means?” Eve chittered excitedly.

“Elder Kind and Dame Sunshine will share lots of butternuts!” all four chittered in unison.

They scampered over to Jessophat. “Is true, Elder Kind?”

Jessophat flicked his tail up and down once. “Yes, in one pawspan we eat lots of butternuts with your great granddame and great grandsire.”

“YEAH!”

“Come pups,” Lily called out. “We go clean in brook.”

The pups followed their second mother up the tree. The other adults followed. Raoul stared after them. After observing how Butternut interacted with them, he could see why she desperately wanted pups of her own. He felt a slight tinge of guilt that he couldn’t give them to her. It wasn’t the first time he wished he was a squirrel rather than a raccoon. Well, maybe with a little more work on Aldin, he would help her get the pups she wanted, even if he wasn’t the father of them.

“I think our adopted granddaughter has the right idea, love,” Raoul stated. “Come, let’s go freshen-up. Maybe Pinecone and Aldin would care to join us?” He glanced at the two of them.

Aldin only hesitated a brief moment as he glanced at Pinecone. The two of them followed Raoul and Butternut into the guest quarters.

THREE

Raoul patted his stuffed tummy. "You've done it again, Carulin, with such an excellent meal. I've said this in the past and repeat it again. If you feed me like that all the time, I won't be able to climb this tree within a week. I'll wind up having to sleep all alone in your guest quarters. No drey would be able to support me." He repeated it in chitterspeak for his adopted family members.

"You sleep in a drey like us, great grandsire?" Night asked, curling his tail briefly.

"I no try sleep in drey before now, Night," Raoul replied. "I want to try. Will you and the others help me build one tomorrow? It will need to be big and strong. It has to hold me, Butternut," he glanced at Pinecone and Aldin, "maybe Elder Pinecone, and Elder Voice Friend, too."

Night scampered slowly around Raoul looking him over and then glanced at his littermates. They raised their tails once. He then looked up at the biggen raccoon. "You very big Biggen, Great Grandsire Curious. Much bigger than Elder Kind or Dame Sunshine. We will need to find just the right branch. Will be hard." He wigwagged his tail in thought briefly before continuing. "But I know we can do it." His siblings enthusiastically agreed.

Pinecone suddenly tensed up and glared over at Blossom and Saniel, uttering a near inaudible chittergrowl. She had seen they had tried to sneak a quick nuzzle. Both drooped their tails as everyone fell silent looking at them. Sensing what the issue was, Nimble and his mates thanked their hosts and ushered their pups out. They knew they should not witness what may be about to occur. Cloud leaned into his parents and quietly asked if he and his brothers should also leave. Aldin flicked his tail up and down once in reply. He, Twig, and Chatter left thanking Jessophat and Carulin as they did so.

Saniel seemed to come to a decision and pulled Blossom into a protective snuggling embrace and glared back at both sets of parents in defiance as his tail lashed back and forth. Blossom buried herself in his embrace. Butternut glanced back and forth. She chattered for attention and all glanced at her.

"If I may speak?" She paused a moment until all the other adults flicked their tails up and down once. She then turned first to Jessophat and Carulin and then to Pinecone and Aldin. "I think you're too late in trying to keep them apart." She then looked at Saniel and Blossom. "When did you start sharing a drey?"

Saniel's body language changed from defiant tension to a more relaxed tone. Before he could reply, Blossom answered. "I started nesting with Saniel seven days ago, the day Sorel died. I am the one who asked him if I could join him in his drey, not the other way around. I was shaken-up over her death. After that first night, neither of us wanted to be alone."

Pinecone drooped her tail and bowed her head. “Two seasons old! Most pups no two seasons old until fall harvest. I like pup hope they wait like all other pups born this year though they half season older!”

Jessophat and Carulin looked back and forth a bit confused.

Butternut now looked at Jessophat and Carulin. “‘Biggens’ usually start dating in senior school, correct?” They nodded. “And dating may lead to becoming mates? I ask so Pinecone and Aldin will understand how it is different between ‘Biggens’ and cousin squirrels.” Again, they nodded.

“It is how we met,” Carulin added.

Butternut turned to Pinecone. “I now will ask the other way to help Jessophat and Carulin understand how it is for cousin/smart squirrels. Among cousin squirrels, at two seasons in age, usually at the start of fall, females will choose their potential mate, correct?” Pinecone nodded while flicking her tail up and down once. “They establish a territory and work together to gather enough food to survive the winter, correct?” Again, she nodded while flicking her tail up and down once. Butternut then turned back to Jessophat and Carulin. “If things work-out together between two such cousin squirrels, come mid-to-late winter they become mates and raise a family in some forests. In other forests, they live together another year before doing so. It depends on the rules in that forest. If things don’t work out, they part ways. Call it an extended date if you wish. So, at this point your son and their daughter are dating each other cousin squirrel-style by nesting together.”

“Yes, we have chosen each other as potential mates,” Saniel stated, relaxing his embrace of Blossom as she wiggled free. “We’ve talked a lot about how it would be different for us.”

“Saniel has known me my whole life,” Blossom jumped in. “I know that with his parents’ permission, Mother allowed him to witness my birth. When Dame Lily wasn’t available to watch over us, he’d offer and would play with us like a big brother. He taught my siblings and me how to speak and read Common as Dad calls it. He taught me how to pilot a hovercraft during the cherry harvest. I knew by then that he was the one for me.” She drooped her tail. “Then after what happened to Sorel, I knew I shouldn’t wait any longer. None of us know how long we will live.

“As Dad is a citizen, that makes me one too,” Blossom grasped Saniel’s larger forepaws in her own. “I know that means biggens will not view me as an adult until I’m two. And along with that, our Elder Council has encouraged cousin smart squirrels to wait until their second winter to have pups to line-up with Biggen law. Which may be easier than you think as that was the rule in Elder Foxy’s old forest and had been encouraged here among those who banished Mom. I also understand that Saniel,” she squeezed his forepaws affectionately, “will not be an adult for another four years. That gives us plenty of time to determine if things would work for the two of us and if we should become mates and start a family.” She gazed into his eyes as best she could, though both of their sets of eyes were to the sides of their muzzles to better watch for predators

all around. “And I know he’ll probably outlive me, which he understands as Biggens grow more slowly and live longer than cousins.”

“And we understand it may not work-out, but we need to try,” Saniel added. “We understand the rules of The Refuge, how it is a combination of smart cousin squirrel and biggen rules and laws. We will not mate until we are both considered adults and only if we decide we work as a couple.”

Butternut glanced from the young adults, as that is what they were now based on their declaration of intent, to their parents and back. “It is obvious that your parents are not in agreement with your decision and I think I know why.” She paused a moment. “I suspect they are afraid for you.”

“What?” the young couple asked in unison looking between one set of parents and the other.

“Have you considered the possible consequences should you mate and Blossom become pregnant?” Butternut looked briefly at Raoul who simply nodded. “There have been no studies on whether or not cousin and citizen squirrels are compatible. What if it turns out you are? The differences between you two could be deadly for your pups and/or for Blossom herself.”

Both Saniel and Blossom wigwagged their tails nervously. “How so?” they asked.

Butternut glanced at both sets of parents visually requesting permission to continue. Saniel’s parents nodded while flicking their tails up and down once. Pinecone and Aldin flicked their tails up and down once.

“I know you both understand the mating process to create pups. What occurs in order for pups to take and grow in the mother’s womb?”

“A male and female couple. The male giving seed that combines with the female’s eggs,” both responded.

“DNA from both are combined to make the new life,” Blossom added.

“I’m impressed you know that much detail, Blossom,” Butternut replied.

“I’ve been studying hard in order to go to senior school like Saniel.” She pulled her flatpanel off her back, tapped an icon, and showed the acceptance letter on the screen to the same school Saniel’s parents planned to send him to. “I received word I was accepted just prior to dinner.” She whirled her tail proudly. “I will be their first cousin squirrel.” She then drooped her tail. “But I need my parents’ permission to do so. I was careful not to give my family name during testing and the application process as I didn’t want that to influence their decision. But then, they required an interview and learned the truth. I hope it didn’t influence their decision. I am not trying to change the subject, Elder Butternut. We may wait to discuss that afterward. I just felt I needed to explain how I understand the term, DNA.”

Butternut nodded. “Congratulations, Blossom. And thank you for not trying to distract from the topic of pups. Yes, when a male and female mate they both provide some DNA for the new life. Your DNA, Blossom, is very different from Saniel’s as you’re a cousin squirrel and he’s a ‘Biggen’. You don’t know which DNA will dominate in the resulting new life. Look at yourself. Your father’s DNA dominated in some things such as giving you vocal cords that let you speak Common. So, what do you think will happen if Saniel’s DNA dominates? Have you two considered the consequences of that?”

Their eyes widened as they shook their heads back and forth while wigwagging their tails left to right in unison.

“It takes about 175 days, half a year for a biggen pup to grow in the womb before it’s ready to be born,” Blossom stated recalling what she studied for the test. “For us cousins, it’s 45 to 50 days.”

“Correct,” Butternut responded. “And cousin squirrels bare an average of four pups at once to a biggen’s one or, rarely, two. How big were you at birth, Saniel?”

Saniel drooped his tail at the realization of what Buttercup was explaining to them. “I was about two-hundred milos⁴.”

Blossom’s eyes shot wide as her tail wigwagged back and forth rapidly. “I currently weigh about twice that. I couldn’t possibly bare three to five pups that big!”

Butternut nodded. “And trying to grow pups that big would probably kill you as your womb is too small, Blossom.” She drooped her tail. “Or as you are a cousin squirrel, you might birth them after the normal gestation period for a cousin squirrel, about a quarter of the time a biggen needs. They, being very premature, would probably die soon after birth.”

Blossom buried her muzzle into Saniel’s shoulder and wept. Her boyfriend gently stroked the back of her head and fought back tears of his own while comforting her. The possible consequences of the differences between them hadn’t occurred to either of them. Their parents remained quiet through this, but all quietly mouthed thank you to Butternut for being the one to explain it to their pups. None of them had wanted to be the one to give them the bad news knowing they probably wouldn’t listen to them at their age. After about ten ceclicks. Blossom began to calm down and pulled back away from her boyfriend. They looked directly at Buttercup.

“Thank you, Elder Buttercup for warning us,” Blossom began. “We hadn’t thought of that.” She looked-up at Saniel.

He nodded and added, “We still wish to date cousin-style, despite the potential danger.”

“If it works out, we’ll just have to adopt,” Blossom added.

⁴ Milo-gram

“Or as both citizen law and The Refuge allows for multiple mates, we’ll have to find a male cousin squirrel to join us,” Saniel replied.

Their parents physically relaxed and looked at each other and then back to their pups.

Aldin spoke next, “As you understand the potential danger, I will not object to the two of you nesting together.” He glanced to the others, “And I hope the others agree.” The other parents flicked their tails up and down once and all relaxed. “Good. Now, then, what’s this about Senior School, Blossom?”

FOUR

The young couple hugged and nuzzled each other. Blossom then pulled her flatpanel off her back and showed her parents the acceptance letter from Rock City Senior School.

“I’ve been studying hard every evening into the night for the past month. I want to become a doctor, specifically, a general medical practitioner, and return to serve here at The Refuge. That way, we won’t need to rely so much on the biggen woodchuck, Dr. Neroff, in the ‘biggen’ village. He’s good, but always needs to reach out to Dr. Territan for advice ‘cause he didn’t study cousin squirrel anatomy in college for obvious reasons. I had to interpret for a squirrel on one visit about a month back and I became fascinated with what he was doing. I started asking questions and the more I spoke to him, the more I realized it was what I wanted to do. So, I asked him what I would need to do to become a doctor. He explained I would need to attend college. To do that, I first need to attend and graduate from senior school.”

Pinecone shook her head and turned to Aldin. “Our Blossom grow up fast. She is your small biggen pup with lofty plans, Friend.”

“No, Pinecone. She is ***our*** pup with lofty plans, thinking how she can contribute to the success of our colony,” Aldin replied. “Much like how I was trying to learn physics back on Terra to help my people at Namakanta before I got sucked through some sort of doorway into this world.” He looked at his daughter. “First, Blossom, basic schooling takes six years among Citizen species to learn. Even back on Terra, it took our people a minimum of one-and-a-half intensive years to learn a basic education curriculum. How did you learn all that in just a month?”

Blossom looked down briefly scuffing a paw while drooping her tail. “I sort of cheated a little. But not like you think,” she added before her parents could react. “There are study guides for the Senior School exam. So, I concentrated on studying what I needed to learn to pass the exam. I barely passed because those guides are just guides. They don’t explain all that will be tested. They just give examples. What I didn’t study is what I didn’t do well on. If you read through the letter, you’ll see I’ll be required to take ‘remedial’ classes in addition to the normal senior school classes. My barely passing the exam was the reason for the muzzle-to-muzzle interview by flatpanel with the school master. I guess they hold such conferences for those who are borderline. I think I shocked him when he saw what species I was. His first questions were how old I was and how I learned what I learned. I think they’re going to be adjusting the study guides

and the exam in the future. He had to cut the interview short and arrange for a second one. In that second interview he decided to give me a chance as their first cousin squirrel student instead of telling me to go study more and try again next term.”

“Blossom, do you truly understand what you’re getting into?” Aldin asked his daughter. “You would be the only cousin squirrel there. You’ll be lonely and scared until you can make friends. There will be all kinds of species there, including those that you’ll instinctually view as predators. Raoul here is very small compared to some of them. Look what it took for you to meet him earlier today. Biggens live differently than we do. You can’t compare it to how Jessophat, Carulin and Saniel live as they live differently from other Biggens. In addition, Citizens learn at a slower pace. Once you finish the remediation classes and start to take senior classes, you might grow bored at the pace.”

Blossom drooped her tail. “You’ve taught me how to deal with instinctual fear, Father. I know I’ll need more practice on that. I won’t be lonely as I’ll have Saniel with me,” she paused a moment and glanced at his parents. “Unless they change their mind and have him attend remotely or send him to a different school now.” She drooped her tail. “If you read through the correspondence with the school master, you will see that they promise that, if necessary, they will try and compress the curriculum to more my learning style if I find the pace too slow and prove I can handle a faster pace. I may be able to jump ahead a full school year each term once I finish the remediation classes and depending on how I do with the normal classes.”

“Saniel still needs to take and pass the entrance exam,” Carulin replied. She looked at her mate.

“If he passes, we’ll let him attend with you,” Jessophat added. “Provided your parents let you attend.”

Saniel immediately moved over to his parents and hugged them. Blossom followed suit. They both looked over at Aldin and Pinecone who were quietly conversing together. Both flicked their tails up and down once. Aldin spoke for them looking at the young couple. “We agree with Saniel’s parents. If he passes the exam, we will tentatively let you attend senior school with him, Blossom.”

“Tentatively?”

Aldin sighed and glanced at Butternut and Raoul. “I know you two just got here, but I’m afraid my duties as a parent will need to come first in this case.” He turned back to Blossom. “I have some business to conduct in Rock City in two days that I had planned to do remotely because of our guests. Now, it will be muzzle-to-muzzle. You’re coming with me. The best way to learn to interact with Biggens is to actually do it. Show you can suppress the fear as I’ve tried to teach you and you will be able to go to Senior School with Saniel. We’ll leave tomorrow.”

The young couple now hugged Aldin and Pinecone in thanks.

“It’s a deal, Father.” She turned to her boyfriend. “I know you will take the exam in two days, Saniel. Do you need to study more for it?” He nodded while flicking his tail up and down once.

Blossom turned back to the adults. “May we be excused so I can help my boyfriend study?” After a simple nod from the adults, Blossom retrieved her flatpanel from her father, hugged him and her mother again, and let Saniel lead her to his room in the tree to do as she suggested.

Once they were out of sight and earshot, Carulin turned to Butternut and hugged her. “Thank you for helping handle that for us.”

Butternut scuffed her left rear paw and looked down briefly before looking back up. “I may not have had any pups of my own, yet. But I have raised cousin squirrels I’ve adopted. And I was born a ‘biggen’, so, who better to bridge the differences between our two species?”

“And it helps put off the issue of Saniel potentially getting Blossom pregnant for several years,” Jessophat added.

That got Pinecone’s and Aldin’s full attention. “How so,” Aldin asked for the two of them.

“Among Biggens it’s not unusual for young adults in senior school to experiment with coupling. So, they are required to have a long-term contraceptive embedded under the skin to ensure no pregnancy occurs. Should they decide to not wait until they are both adults to become mates, Blossom will not be endangered. Among Biggens, unlike cousin squirrels, there is more to becoming mates than just coupling. It is accepted that young adults might couple while at senior school. It’s one of the reasons, a young adult must have written permission from their parents/guardians to attend.”

Pinecone pulled her flatpanel off her back to look up the word, contraceptive, rather than ask. She guessed the spelling correctly on the first try and read through the term. Her eyes widened briefly as she read how there were different versions. The male version kills the seed. The female version prevents her eggs from implanting in the uterus should they become fertilized. “Biggens can be strange. Choose to mate while not wanting pups,” she muttered. She closed her eyes and thought for a moment. She tucked the flatpanel back on her back as she opened her eyes and flicked her tail up and down once. “I agree, it better they in Biggen school together than stay here. It safer for Blossom should she choose to lead Energy on a mate chase through the trees before he see ten and six winters.”

Aldin flicked his tail up and down once in agreement.

All were quiet for a moment. Raoul glanced at the entrance noting the long shadows. “It’s getting near sunset. It’s early for me, but I know Butternut isn’t the night owl she once was when she was a ‘Biggen’.” He looked at Aldin and Pinecone. “Will you two be joining us tonight? After all, those two,” he pointed in the direction the young couple had scampered off in, “aren’t the only ones ‘dating’ here.” He chuckled.

Aldin glanced at his mate and turned to the other two. “We will, but we need to go talk to our other pups first so they are in the loop about how we feel about Blossom and Saniel.” He turned to their hosts. “Thank you for dinner.”

FIVE

“Great grandsire Curious, bend it just a little more,” Night encouraged Raoul on. “Good. Hold it there!”

As Raoul held the now bent large branch in place, Eve and Swift quickly wove other smaller branches around it. Tansey carefully dragged the next, nearly too big for her branch up the tree trunk in her mouth, and then held it out for Raoul to take next.

“Slowly release,” Night commanded. Raoul slowly relaxed his grip on the larger branch. The other smaller branches held it in place. He accepted the next large branch from Tansey, thanking her in the process. The drey slowly took shape, big enough for a biggen raccoon and three cousin squirrels to share.

Butternut watched not daring to jump into the fray. She was amazed at how well Raoul interacted with their adopted great grandpups. He appeared to be enjoying himself as the pups taught him how to build a drey. And they were doing a good job of it too from what she could see watching from the next tree over. As she watched the construction progress, a gray squirrel landed on the branch next to her.

“You are Butternut?” the other chittered, raising its tail in a curl briefly.

Butternut flicked her tail up and down once as she looked at the gray squirrel with rounded ears. She looked like Pinecone but appeared to be a bit older. “I am. You are?”

“Tassel, head of the Council of Elders” she bowed. They then sniffed each other briefly before Tassel continued. “I sorry I no have time to greet you and biggen raccoon, Curious, yesterday.”

Butternut bowed in turn. “I thank you, Elder Tassel. You allow my mate and me to visit your territory.”

Tassel waved it off as she watched the organized chaos happening on the next tree over. “I know why you here.” She glanced at the drey construction. “Your mate is good with pups. Is too bad he no squirrel.”

Again, Butternut flicked her tail up and down once. “He like squirrel inside, Elder Tassel. Biggens chose one thing study much about. Curious choose study smart squirrels.”

“Teacher speak to me about your mate, Butternut. He speak a lot about him. So has my pup, Pinecone.” She paused a moment watching the drey construction. “There are others you need to meet. Please follow me. They will be scared of your mate. Maybe in time, they will be less scared.” Tassel wigwagged her tail back and forth a few times. “I no blame them. He so big. Bigger than Kind and Sunshine. I scared even from here. Your great grandpups very brave. Come. Others wait.”

Not knowing if it was a request or an order and not wanting to upset the squirrel in charge of this forest, Butternut followed Tassel through the treetops. After a few ceclicks they were back near Jessophat's and Carulin's tree home. There were many squirrels gathered in the trees. Up front, Teacher sat by himself. A squirrel with orangish-red fur and tasseled ears sat on a branch near Teacher. Tassel led Butternut over to Teacher. Butternut bowed to Teacher. The two of them sniffed each other briefly. Teacher then held his paws open very biggen-like and Butternut accepted his warm embrace.

Teacher looked about. "This is Butternut. Like Friend, she is a small biggen and can biggenspeak."

There was hushed chittering among some of those present, which ceased at a flick of Teacher's tail.

"Her tale is hers to speak if she chose to speak it. She and her biggen raccoon mate, Curious," he had to pause and flick his tail again for silence as others started chittering among themselves at the announcement that her mate was a biggen raccoon. Once the others fell silent again, he continued. "They are here to nest with Pinecone and Friend. They are welcome in The Refuge."

The others cheered and quickly fell silent as all seemed to glue their beady rodent eyes on Butternut. She quietly gigglechittered to herself, twitching her tail nervously. She glanced at Teacher. "I got little chose, do I?"

Teacher wigwagged his tail left to right and back once.

"Well, if it help us fit in," she said quietly to him before turning to the others and raising her voice. "I born a biggen squirrel." She then repeated it in Common. That brought a gasp from those gathered. She ignored it and continued with her tale in chitterspeak. "I see two tens and six winters as a Biggen." There were more gasps from some present who had never asked about Biggen ages. "Then accident happen. Biggens no understand. Accident make me change. I grow small, become smart squirrel. I so scared of Biggens I had called friends. I scared of my mate. I flee from him to nearby forest. There I met Teacher. He no take name yet..." There were no more interruptions as all listened to her tale. A pawspan went by as she told her life story in brief. She finished with her and Raoul's arrival at The Refuge the day before and why they had come. As she finished, there was silence among those who had listened to her.

One of the listeners stepped forward on his branch and raised his tail. Teacher indicated he may speak.

"Butternut, who once serve as Biggen Elder, I may no speak for all or I may," the male looked about briefly before continuing, his tail whipped back and forth giving away his nervousness. "I believe things happen for reason. Nimble good friend. If no for you, he would no be here. He would be dead. If no for you, Teacher would no be here. He would be dead." He drooped his tail. "Elder Voice Friend would be dead." He gestured about with his tail. "No one of us would be here if no for you. You want pups in spring, you will have them. If Friend no make pups with you, many here will offer."

“Including you, Seed Spinner?” Someone called out. Some others giggled at the intended good nature ribbing.

Seed Spinner grabbed his tail and hid his muzzle in it a moment before releasing it and flicking it up and down once. “If Elder Butternut chose me and her first mate agree, I would.” He looked about. “And so would many of you. Admit it. For all she do for us, the least we can do is make her a dame as she wish.”

That seemed to settle the matter between Seed Spinner and his heckler as others called out agreement. The gathering seemed to break-up then, with many coming forward to sniff and introduce themselves to Butternut and personally welcome her. She knew she’d have a hard time trying to keep the names straight. Fortunately, each of them had a unique scent, which would help. Eventually, the only squirrels left were Teacher, Tassel, herself, and the orangish red one, who now introduced herself as Foxy.

Butternut embraced her in a hug. “I so sorry what happened to you and your people, Elder Foxy.”

Foxy drooped her tail briefly. “Is bad and is good. Is bad forest burn and so many die. Is good those who survive come here. Is different. Good different than old forest.”

“Foxy one my better students,” Teacher struggled a little with the last term, which he learned from Aldin. “She quick learn.”

“I feel I must. Old Elders keep so much from us. I angry they do that,” Foxy whipped her tail back and forth in agitation. “So many no need die. Here all may learn Elder things if choose. Is good. Here we use tools that help with harvest. That good. No one will starve. We will succeed here.” She flicked her tail up and down once for emphasis.

“Even if you become like small Biggens?” Butternut hesitantly asked.

Foxy flicked her tail up and down once again. It audibly slapped on the branch she was perched on. “Many die here and in my old forest following old ways. I believe we must try new ways to survive. I no care what smart squirrels in other forests think. Call us small Biggens if they chose. We smart squirrels like them. We smarter as we live in truce, work together, make whole colony strong. We smarter use tools to make harvest work easier. If my grandpups learn Biggen symbols and use Biggen viewer to speak to Biggens like Pinecone is good. More Biggens understand us the better.” Foxy paused a moment. “How long you speak you visit?”

“My mate and I here only to start of harvest time.”

Foxy wigwagged her tail back and forth left to right and back once in disagreement. “No, if you want pups you no leave. You must stay here through spring. If you no here through spring, you will no have pups. You must stay if you want pups. Your Biggen mate may go back to Biggens at harvest time if he chose. But if you go, you no have pups.”

Butternut was shocked to silence by the obvious truth of her statement. When she and Raoul came, it was with the understanding it would only be for a few weeks. She figured come mid-winter, Aldin would be back near them due to needing to be on call for Parliament and that's when she'd make her move and finally win him over. It never occurred to her that she may have better luck if she settled here.

"Is too soon to choose. We arrive just yesterday. Friend will be with Biggen Elders when time make pups. Is why I no think stay here through winter." She looked directly at Foxy. "You wise Elder, get me think other way."

Foxy briefly hid her muzzle in her tail at the praise. She still wasn't used to receiving praise for stating what she thought was obvious.

SIX

Butternut arrived back just in time to see the drey being finished. At least the exterior of it that is. Her adopted great grandpups were now using backpacks to bring leaves to Raoul to line the interior. She could smell cedar in the mix.

"Why you add cedar?" she asked them, raising her tail briefly in a curl.

All four paused and Night answered for his siblings. "Cedar scare away biting insects, Great Granddame Butternut."

She flicked her tail up and down once. "Who teach you that?" she again raised her tail briefly in a curl.

"Sire Nimble and Dame Buttercup. Sire Nimble speak it one of first things you teach him."

Again, Butternut flicked her tail up and down once as she experienced a feeling of pride. "I glad he remember," she responded. "He is correct. It scare away biting insects, and I love the smell of cedar." She bowed in thanks to her great grandpups as they went back to finishing the interior of the drey.

Half-a-pawspan later, she was invited in to inspect the drey. She was impressed. The top was impervious to light. She suspected it would also shed rain with ease. The sides weren't so tight to allow in some light and air circulation. There was the right amount of leaves and moss on the interior to make it comfortable. And it easily fit both her and Raoul with enough room that Aldin and Pinecone should also be able to snuggle down with them. Her great grandkits proved this as all four of them could snuggle in next to her and Raoul. The four of them being half-gown making a good substitute. Both she and Raoul praised and thanked them. They departed quickly mentioning it was Teacher's class time soon and they no wish to miss class.

Raoul was just happy to lay there curled-up in the drey snuggled next to her. She filled him in on her meeting with the others.

“Elder Foxy is right, you know, hon,” he replied when she finished.

She wigwagged her tail nervously. “What about your classes?”

Raoul attempted and butchered a gigglechitter. “I’ve been busy since spring, Butternut. I filed for a sabbatical in anticipation.” He pulled his flatpanel off his side and swiped at it. He paused a moment waiting for the letter to load. The drey was barely on the edge of what Jessophat’s and Carulin’s set-up could broadcast out to. He showed her. “The approval just came through, finally. I’m excused from teaching for the coming year as I’ve taken a research sabbatical.”

She looked at him with her head tilted at an angle encouraging him to continue.

“Well, when else would I have a better chance to observe cousin squirrels up close. I’d never had an opportunity like this in Teacher’s old forest, even if his great granddaughter granted permission and I offered those I spoke to a backpack full of butternuts in trade. Here, in time, I’ll be accepted as a member by more than our adopted family, and the others will, hopefully, just let me observe and interact. This drey is an excellent example. Yes, I could have asked you to let me watch as you build one back home, but I got to help build this one and now my understanding of the process is more complete than if I had simply watched.” He shifted slightly. “And it’s more comfortable than I imagined. I’m going to have a lot to jot down about this later. My challenge will be showing enough discipline to write all this down every day rather than just live the moment, so to speak.”

“You’ve heard how long the winters are here. This drey is a good summer home. It won’t last long, nor keep us warm come the first snowstorm. How are we going to manage that? It wouldn’t be right to move in on Jessophat and Carulin for the winter.”

“I’m a step ahead of you on that, too, love.” He swiped at his device again, patiently waited a moment, and showed her. “I’ve already planned the arrangements to outfit a tree much like Jessophat’s and Carulin’s. It’ll be similar in layout to their tree combined with what we had back home such as countertops that adjust in height depending on whether it’s you or me using them. There will be the soaker tub you love so much. I think it’ll be the tree directly north of this one. Oh, and with an interior ladder so I can climb up and down from the ground out of the elements. The work starts tomorrow and should be complete before the first snow flies.”

Butternut chitterwhistled. “That’s a lot of credits, Raoul.”

He shrugged as he tucked the flat panel back onto his hip and then gently scratched her just where she enjoyed it most at the base of her neck. “And what good do credits do if you don’t put them to work for you? If things do work out, we’ll relocate here for good and sell our old home. If it doesn’t work out and we don’t stay, we’ll gift the tree back to them in thanks for letting us visit. You want pups and as I can’t give them to you, I’m going to do everything that I can to give you the best chance of getting them, hon.”

She nuzzled him affectionately as tears welled up in her eyes as the emotions that she felt overwhelmed her for the sacrifices he was making for her.

He rolled over on his back, gently scooping her up in the process, and laying her on his stomach so he could more easily face her muzzle-to-muzzle. He lightly kissed her cheek. "I've seen how you continue to struggle back home, hon. Despite all Aldin has taught you, I see the fear you try and hide every time you go out and about among us 'Biggens.' Maybe you'll find it easier to fit in among cousin squirrels. And I'm fascinated with what they've done here in such a short period of time, creating a blend of cousin squirrel and citizen society."

"Thanks to Aldin."

"Yes and no. He didn't force these changes on them, nor did he promote them. Yes, he did speak about how his people lived when asked last winter. The others liked the idea so much, that all of them, except him and Teacher voted to give it a try. He didn't vote in favor of it as he didn't want to influence them. From what I heard from Teacher, he remained neutral as he felt at the time, he was still just a visitor there to educate their Elder in Elder things. That vote was prior to Tassel choosing him as her new mate."

Butternut stared at Raoul.

"Aldin and I have had several conversations since you officially 'chose' him this past winter nuzzling him and stroking his back. You could have had pups right then and there, hon, if you had chosen to scamper out the door. He would have followed you."

"And once instincts were no longer in control and he was himself again, would he have forgiven me?" She flicked her tail left to right a few times. "No, I hope I have shown I have more respect for him than that. It needs to be his decision as much as mine."

He nuzzled her. "And I'm very proud of you for that, hon."

SEVEN

Blossom hugged Saniel. "Good luck on the exam tomorrow."

"Best of luck with your father these next few days, too," he replied, nuzzling her briefly.

They disengaged and Blossom joined her father. She looked about. "How come you haven't summoned a hovercraft yet, Father?"

"We will go to the village first," Aldin replied as he started off through the tree branches. He quickly increased the pace, but Blossom easily kept up with him. "It's unusual among Biggen settlements, Blossom," he continued as they made their way from branch to branch. "No predator

species. You can get in some practice there before we head onto Rock City. We also need to check-in briefly with Dr. Neroff.”

Blossom darted a little ahead of Aldin and stopped on a branch, blocking his way unless he changed directions. He landed next to her and paused. “Why do we need to see Dr. Neroff?” She asked, raising her tail briefly in a curl.

“We need to get you a referral to a specialist in Rock City.”

“Why?”

Aldin gently grasped her forepaws in his. “Senior school attendees are required to have a contraceptive implant unless they have a medical waiver.”

“I saw that in the paperwork.” She looked down a moment drooping her tail and then looked back up at her father. “I wish I had seen that before Sanial and I promised you, mother, and his parents we’d wait until he was an adult before we become mates.”

Aldin nervously gigglechattered. “You’re growing up so fast, my daughter. Should you two chose to become mates at school while it’s safe to do so, that’s your and his business.”

“Really?”

Aldin again flicked his tail up and down once.

She hugged him tightly. As she pulled out of the embrace, she asked, “That’s what you and mother were discussing early this morning, wasn’t it?”

“Partially. Our concern is that you’re too young for a contraceptive implant, Blossom. It’s why we need to get you a medical waiver. It has to come from a specialist doctor, one who concentrates on reproduction. And you can’t just scamper into a specialist’s office. You need a referral first.”

“Okay. What about once I reach sexual maturity mid-winter?”

“If you wish to receive the implant, we can have the waiver lifted then and you can have the implant. Your mother still doesn’t understand why Biggens choose to mate without wanting pups to take. Theirs is a different society from ours with different rules.”

Blossom was silent in thought for a moment. “Yes, Biggens are different. However, it makes sense to me, Father.” She cocked her head at an angle while looking at him. “Well, sort of. It would be hard to keep attending senior school or college if you have pups who need to be cared for.”

“To quote Teacher, ‘You are wise beyond your seasons, my child.’” He smiled at her and pointed the way towards the village with his tail. “Shall we keep going?”

“Lead the way, Father.”

Dr. Neroff had no hesitations in providing the needed referral, though he was surprised to learn Blossom had already been accepted into senior school. Blossom got some practice interacting with some of the villagers. Her instincts screamed at her to flee from some, especially the huge to her beaver shop keeper, but somehow, she was able to tamp it down until they were no longer in front of her. Then she fled up the nearest tree screeing in fear. Her father joined her soon after. To her surprise, he remained calm.

Once she calmed down, he pulled an earbud out of one of his ears before she could ask. “They are programmed to cancel out the sound of a warning scree, Blossom. I surprised your mother the first time she called out like you and I didn’t react to it.”

“How long have you used those, Father?”

“I only use them when I’m helping a fellow squirrel learn how to interact with Biggens. This is the first time I’ve had to put them in since last summer.”

Blossom drooped her tail. “I failed and you didn’t answer my question.”

“Nonsense, you did well. You’re not going to be able to suppress your fear instincts instantly and completely, my daughter. It’s going to take more practice. And it’s better to get that practice in now before you start senior school.” Aldin grabbed his flatpanel and summoned a hovercraft. “I think we’ve spent enough time here. It’s two clicks to Rock City. I’ll talk about why I started using the earbuds on our way there.” He glanced at a message and drooped his tail. “And it looks like we’ll be there a couple of days. The earliest the specialist can see you is the morning after tomorrow.”

EIGHT

Blossom nervously followed her father along the paved ground a block from where they left the hovercraft. The buildings were so much larger compared to those in the village. There were Biggens everywhere of all species and sizes. They all gave her and Aldin some room as they scampered down the walkway. She felt their eyes watching them as they passed. More than once she caught whispered questioning among them, ‘Is that the Ambassador?’ She didn’t flee simply because she feared getting separated from her father. She wished there were enough trees here so they could just go from branch to branch instead. She felt very vulnerable there on the ground. She could see he must have been nervous too as he left damp paw prints as he went. He turned a corner and the buildings fell away to reveal a small park. She quickly climbed a tree and let the fear take over, screeing out a warning. Again, Aldin joined her soon afterward and calmly waited

for her to recover. To her embarrassment, her cries had gathered a small crowd of onlookers. Aldin scampered back down. After a short conversation, the Biggens went on their way.

Once she had calmed down, she came back down and Aldin proceeded to lead her again among the buildings. He turned another corner and then paused a moment outside a building from which the scent of food cooking wafted out into the street.

“Are you hungry?” Aldin asked his daughter.

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once.

“Good, because this is where I need to conduct some of my personal business.” He pointed up at a sign with his tail which read: JOCHEN’S.

He led her inside. The scent of cooked Biggen food nearly overwhelmed her. She had smelled similar scents before when Carulin cooked for her family, but much of this was different. She couldn’t place what it was she was smelling.

“Embassador?! Welcome!” a biggen squirrel with tasseled ears and a pelt that was a mix of tawny brown and peppery gray called out as he came out from behind the small counter. He embraced the smaller cousin squirrel, who returned the embrace.

“My plans changed, Jochen, which is why I’m here in the fur for our meeting.” Aldin then turned to his daughter. “This is my daughter, Blossom. Blossom, this is Jochen, owner and operator of this restaurant and one of my business partners.”

Jochen bowed to the younger squirrel and got down on all four paws. “You may sniff if you need to, Blossom,” he spoke in broken chitterspeak.

She accepted the offer and sniffed him briefly. “Thank you, Mr. Jochen,” she replied in Common.

Jochen smiled. “I’m glad to learn you can speak,” he held up some claws like quotation marks, “‘Biggenspeak’. I’m not that good at chitterspeak.”

“I have my father to thank for that.”

“You two must be hungry. Come.” Jochen led them to a table with cushions for seats. The table automatically adjusted to their height as they sat, catching Blossom off guard, causing her to wigwag her tail nervously. He presented them with flatpanel menus. “I’ll be back shortly with water for both of you.” He paused looking at Blossom, “unless the young lady would prefer herbal tea. I know your father prefers water.”

“Tea?” Blossom raised her tail in a curl briefly.

“Herbs seeped in hot water adding flavor to the water.” Jochen responded. “I’ll bring both tea and water for you.” The biggen squirrel passed through a door. As the door opened and closed, the scent of cooked food became stronger for a moment.

“My grandfather drank herbal tea on occasion back on Terra. What I have encountered here is similar. I never developed a taste for it there nor here.”

Blossom nodded as she stared at the menu and was thankful both that there were photos of the various items and that Saniel had demonstrated how they worked with her the previous day to help her prepare for this trip. As she scrolled through, she stared at the section marked Terran Pizza. She looked up again at her father. “Terran pizza?” Her tail briefly raised in a curl.

“As I said, Jochen is a business partner. I taught him some Terran ‘Biggen’ recipes and permitted him to use them. In return, I receive a small fee from him on his sales of Terran food. Pizza is one of the few cooked food items from Terra that I can actually stomach in small amounts. Based on the fees I’ve been receiving; it has become very popular here.”

Jochen returned with glasses of water, two mugs, and a small, covered teapot on a tray. An herbal scent wafted from the covered pot. He set the water down in front of Blossom and Aldin. He then proceeded to pour tea from the pot for Blossom and then for himself. He pulled up a cushion and sat down with them.

“Have you decided what you would like to eat?”

Blossom drooped her tail. “There’s so much to choose from.” She sniffed the tea and could tell it was too hot to try and taste. It did have a pleasant scent. She detected mint, though she was unsure what the various other scents were.

“You’ll want to let that cool some more first, Ms. Blossom,” Jochen warned her.

“I’d like a ten cemit⁵ mushroom and pinenut pizza, butternut flour crust,” Aldin stated. The edge of the flatpanel flashed green a moment as it relayed his order to the kitchen. He set the flatpanel on the edge of the table.

Blossom continued to scroll through the menu until she found the salad section. That was something she had had before at Saniel’s as she wasn’t feeling brave enough to try anything else. “Tossed wild greens with chopped butternuts salad, please,” she ordered mimicking her father. The edge of her flatpanel flashed purple. She wigwagged her tail in concern. “What did I do wrong?”

‘Dressing?’ Flashed on her panel as Jochen pointed it out. “It needs to know what kind of dressing you want on your salad.”

“No dressing,” she replied. “I prefer mine plain.” The edges of her flatpanel flashed green. She set it on top of the other one.

⁵ Cemit-centimeter. 10 cemits is about 4 inches

Jochen gathered them up, brought them over to the counter with the now empty tray, and then rejoined them. He sipped some tea and then looked at Aldin. “Terran pizza has become our biggest seller, Ambassador.”

“I figured as I pay close attention to my bank account, Jochen. I am amazed at how well they’re selling. Per our agreement last year, I’m here to discuss the agreement and possibly renegotiate the terms. Are you happy with how things stand?” Aldin raised his tail in a curl briefly.

“Of course, I am. I also understand if you want a larger fee.”

“Why would I want more credits, Jochen? I’m fine with the current arrangement. Afterall, you’re doing all the work.”

“Only one percent, Ambassador? Other franchises charge more. You now got a family to care for.”

Aldin shrugged his shoulders like a biggen. “Maybe those other franchises are a bit greedy, Jochen. As for family, you have one too. Mine can easily live off the land, so to speak, though Blossom plans to go to college.”

“Really?” he gave her his attention.

“After senior school, which I start this fall, I plan to go to medical college.”

“Senior school already? I knew cousin squirrels grew-up quickly, but wow!” Jochen paused a moment slowly wigwagging his tail back and forth in thought. “That’s quite the career goal, Ms. Blossom.” He turned back to Aldin, “all the more reason I should be giving you a larger fee. Medical college isn’t cheap.”

Aldin shrugged again. “You’re not my only business partner, Jochen. And medical school here is nowhere as expensive as it was back on Terra. I’m quite happy with our terms as they are. And a renegotiation would involve our law counsels.”

Jochen could see he wasn’t going to be able to convince the Ambassador that he should be charging a larger fee. They had been through this the year before. Other franchisers charged up to ten times what Aldin was charging him to sell Terran pizza. He drooped his tail briefly “Very well, Ambassador, I’ll renew our partnership at one percent for another year.” He pulled his flatpanel off his hip where it clung to his fur, called-up the contract, scrolled to the renewal line and applied his palm to the device. A light flashed as it scanned his palm. The panel flashed green. He turned it around for Aldin, who did likewise and the panel flashed green again.

As they completed the transaction, their food was brought to them along with another pizza for Jochen. His had disks of sausage made from a meat substitute. He sipped more of his tea. “Well, if I can’t convince you to charge me a larger franchise fee at least allow me to give you this meal at no charge.”

“That offer, I will accept, Jochen,” Aldin replied. He glanced across at his daughter whose nose was twitching rapidly almost like a rabbit’s. He giggled. “You’re welcome to try some if you want, hon. But it needs to cool a little first.” He used the serving spatula to transfer a slice to a plate. The melted cheese formed strings between it and the rest of the pizza. Aldin broke them with the spatula and handed the plate over to her. Some of the purple tomato sauce seeped off the edge of the slice and onto the plate. Wisps of steam wafted up from the sauce.

Blossom gratefully accepted it and sniffed it. She felt her mouth water. She picked up the tea mug as she had seen Jochen do and carefully took a sip of the tea. Her face lit up at the flavor. It was so good! She drank more of it, spilling a little bit on her chestfur. Jochen refilled her mug.

“Apparently, your daughter likes herbal tea, Ambassador.”

She watched both her father and Jochen pick up a slice of pizza and bite into it. She mimicked them and her eyes grew wide at the flavor combination. Like the tea, it was so good! She quickly worked her way through the slice. Without asking, Jochen gave her another slice, this time from his pizza, which she dug into, her salad all but forgotten.

“It’s her first pizza, Jochen.”

“Really? You’ve never made it for her back home?”

Aldin drooped his tail. “I’m away too much. Remember, Jochen, we are cousin squirrels. We literally live in the middle of a forest. We forage through that forest for our meals this time of year. I would need to borrow Carulin’s and Jessopha’s kitchen to make pizza.”

Blossom nodded, pausing between bites. “You should have seen the cherries we harvested a little over two weeks ago, Mr. Jochen. So ripe, sweet, and yummy. As for Biggen food, I’ve watched and helped Ms. Carulin cook, but most of it wasn’t something that appealed to me. This on the other paw, I love it!” She took another bite and chewed with delight. The sausage was a little spicy and she enjoyed the flavor. She sipped tea in between bites. After finishing the second slice, she dug into the salad, but was only able to eat half of it, much to her dismay. Cousin squirrels never wasted food if they could help it as they usually had to forage for it as her father had pointed out to Jochen. Aldin came to her ‘rescue’ and finished the salad for her.

NINE

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.

TEN

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 Sanial. 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 clicks on and off with a citizen bobcat on a flutter 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 year⁶. 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 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.”

⁶ 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.

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.”

ELEVEN

The following day, Raoul found Butternut outside of Jessophat’s and Carulin’s tree. She was staring at her flatpanel, occasionally swiping a paw across it. She glanced up as his shadow cast over her. He was starting to build up his muscles, both upper and leg thanks to all the up and down climbing he had to do here.

“I’m here as I have a better connection. It’s different out here, as you know, compared to back in the Northeast Hills Region. We’re beyond the broadcast range for power and the network. Thank goodness Jessophat and Carulin have a satellite connection and solar panels. I’ve been researching all morning. It looks like I can do it, hon.”

“Become a teacher?”

She flicked her tail up and down once. “Yes, I can become a basic school curriculum teacher more easily than I thought. I don’t need to take any additional classes. Just a little studying, mostly to freshen up my skills/knowledge, and take the teacher exam. My biology doctorate more than meets the education requirement. I meet the necessary experience through the college classes I taught prior to the accident.”

“That’s wonderful!” he exclaimed scooting around beside her on the huge butternut tree branch so he could see her screen. “Do you need help studying for the exam?”

She flicked her tail left to right and back once. “No, dear. What I need you to do is work closely with the contractors on our new tree home. My students are going to need a strong connection to the world network if I’m to become a basic curriculum teacher.” She pulled the plans up on her flatpanel. “This first lower level originally meant for food storage will become the classroom. We’ll need a few windows added to that level and a bathroom. We’ll just add another level or two below it to make-up for it. We’ll need a large flatpanel on the wall. We’ll also need a larger leech field as the extra bathroom will see more use.” There was excitement in her tone of voice. “And we’ll need more solar panels, too.”

Raoul was quiet for a brief moment as he looked over the additions and he then laughed briefly before replying. "And just a couple days ago you were concerned about the credits I was spending."

"We'll make a deal with the Elders. If they want me to teach, they have to find a way to cover the extra costs."

"You really want to give this a shot?"

Butternut flicked her tail up and down multiple times. "You were right, hon. I felt lost and scared back home during and after my time serving in Parliament. The instinctual fear was difficult to suppress despite what Aldin taught us both."

She gestured about with her tail. "Here, the only time I feel fear is if I sense there may be a predator about. You know I enjoyed teaching in college the most. That made me your opposite as I know you preferred the research over class time."

He nodded.

"And as for living as a 'normal' cousin squirrel, that wasn't for me either. One of the reasons I chose to return from the forest when Aldin showed up was that I wasn't finding fulfillment as a cousin squirrel in that forest. Don't get me wrong. It was important work I was doing, raising orphans. But that's all I was doing. You know I'm more than a home busybody. And I had missed the comforts of a Biggen home. Here? It's like the best of both worlds, Raoul. Cousin squirrels living a combination of how squirrels live in the forest, but with some of things Biggens use."

He teased her, "Like having a soaker tub?"

She nodded vigorously. "Yes. I spent six years without my tub. That was the worst part of living in that forest, Raoul. Tongue baths." She made a puckery face, sticking her tongue out briefly. "It's instinctual, but nowhere as nice as a good soak." She looked up at him and then tapped her flatpanel with her tail. "So, I'm going to give this a try and who knows, maybe I've found my new calling." She shrugged briefly. "And whether it's by Aldin or Teacher, I will have pups come spring." She grasped his much larger forepaws in hers and gently pulled him towards her for a quick nuzzle. "Or maybe this is my version of a mid-life crisis?" She smiled at him. "And I can't thank you enough for humoring me in all this, hon." She drooped her tail. "Not that I'd wish it on you, but if they ever figured out a way to duplicate my accident, you know I'd rather bear your pups."

Raoul shed a few silent tears and hugged her close. "I know hon. I would risk it if it were possible. You know I'm a squirrel at heart." He sighed. "However, I suspect with my luck, if they figured out the process, I'd only wind-up as a cousin raccoon. And that would bring some difficulties in our relationship."

"How so?"

“Well, for one, I’d become nocturnal. We’d hardly see each other while either of us is awake. While there is little research on them, if I recall, they go into a rest period in winter something like hibernating, but not.” He shrugged. “So, with the long, intense winters they have here, I’d literally sleep my life away. Finally, there wouldn’t be as much of me to snuggle with you. I’d only be about twice your size instead of my huge Biggen triple your size.”

She gigglechittered. “That would still be plenty of you to snuggle, hon.” She hugged him tightly.

“I love you so much, Butternut.”

“As I love you too, Raoul. Thank you for this.” She gently pulled away. “However, I need to get back to studying. The sooner I’m ready to take that exam the better. I want to know if I’ve passed it before I give the news to the Elders. If Pinecone comes looking for me, let her know what’s up.”

“I will. I was also looking for you to let you know that I heard from Aldin. He and Blossom won’t return now until tomorrow at the earliest.”

Butternut drooped her tail. “Here it is, we originally came out here to ‘date’ with Aldin, and he’s off with his daughter. But that’s alright, I guess, as I wouldn’t have been able to give him much attention while working on this.”

TWELVE

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. Zsobei 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 Pekan.

“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 chattered 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.

THIRTEEN

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.”

FOURTEEN

The trees in Blossom’s new territory were not as large as those back home in The Refuge. On average about 2 mits in diameter, which was still respectable. There were a mix of tree species, butternut, oak, maple, several types of fir, a few cedars, and others. As she and her father explored the territory, there was one thing she wished she had thought to ask the Elder the previous day. If her territory was the edge of the forest within sight of the school, did that mean it varied with the seasons or was she to treat it as the distance one could see it through the canopy in the spring through fall?

The school building was incredibly long, a good 100 mits or so in length. It reminded Aldin of a wall between human properties back in Terra, but much taller. He didn’t mention this to his daughter. About the half-way point, they came across two small fruit trees. The trunks were roughly their body-length in diameter. The fruit were ripe. Aldin stared at the fruit, not believing what he was seeing as his daughter asked him what they were. The reddish purple fruit were the size and close to the color of a Italian plum back on Terra, roughly half-again as large as a butternut in The Refuge. Except these ‘plums’ were fuzzy like peaches. He picked one and sniffed it over and couldn’t believe what he smelled. He pierced the skin with a claw and sniffed some more, tentatively licking at the juice. His eyes widened in surprise.

“I don’t believe it, Blossom. Back on Terra, these would be yellowish-orange instead of reddish-purple, just like the tomatoes on last night’s pizza would be red back on Terra. And they’re smaller than those on Terra. You have two,” he switched to English for the next word, “peach trees in your territory. In chitterspeak, it’s stonefruit.” He drooped his tail. “I haven’t learned what they’re called in Common as I didn’t know they existed here, hon.” Aldin stuck his claws into the peach and pulled his paws away from each other. The juicy, ripe peach easily split in half. Aldin showed her the pit giving it its chitterspeak name before dropping it. He offered her half of the peach. He then dug into his half, as juice dribbled down his fur and on the branch. “Like cherries, they don’t keep,” he managed between mouthfuls. “When they’re ripe, you need to simply enjoy them.”

Blossom sniffed at and then licked the offered peach half. Her face lit up in delight. It was sweet like cherries, but with a totally different texture and flavor. She also recognized the scent from among the herbs in the tea she had at Jochen’s. She quickly ate through her half. She looked about in the tree and harvested another one and dug in without hesitation. They spent half a klick quietly enjoying the soft fruit. The only noise they made was to harvest one after another and drop the pits.

nervouschitter “Truce?”

Both froze and looked over at the newcomer, a male squirrel. Somehow, he had snuck up on them. Blossom relaxed first. “Truce. Come, sniff, but you must not flee after you sniff. Plenty fruit. Come, eat.”

The squirrel hesitated a moment. “I know you,” he replied wigwagging his tail nervously. “You small Biggens. Invade my territory yesterday. I remember his,” he pointed at Aldin with his tail, “notch tail.”

“Yes, we small Biggens,” she scuffed a paw on the branch. “My sire,” she pointed to Aldin with her tail, “is small Biggen and Elder Voice for our people. My dame is smart squirrel. Makes me both small Biggen and smart squirrel. We speak your Elder yesterday. Elder give me permission claim forest in sight of Biggen place. This now my territory.”

The newcomer’s tail wigwagged faster. He looked like he was preparing to flee. Through this, Aldin simply watched and observed, choosing not to interfere unless he was needed. It was Blossom’s territory, after all, and not his. He continued to nibble on his peach, ready to intervene only if he needed to.

“You no flee,” Blossom stated in a firm commanding voice. “You ask truce. I grant truce. Come, eat. I can no eat all stonefruit. Is better someone eat it, else it rot. Why let good fruit rot?”

Again, the male wigwagged his tail nervously. “You no chase me away?”

Blossom gigglechittered. “Is only fair. We pass through your territory yesterday to speak to Elder. You request truce. I grant truce. I share stonefruit in my territory. Come, eat.”

The newcomer flicked his tail up and down once in agreement and nervously picked a peach and dug in. "I startled find you here. No one goes near Biggen place."

"No one but you," she replied and gigglechittered eyeing the newcomer, who was slightly smaller than her.

"I know stonefruit ripe now. No others dare come here near Biggen place." He looked directly at her. "Why you and your sire here?"

She pointed to the school with her tail. "Biggen learning place. I come to learn Biggen things. Bring what I learn back to my people. I start at harvest time."

"Biggen things?"

Blossom drooped her tail. "I can no speak to you what Biggen things I come learn. Your Elder forbid. Was condition to claim territory." She pointed to her father and herself with her tail. "Our people live different from other smart squirrels. We welcome smart squirrels, small biggens, and biggens. Share territory. Always truce like in winter storm or when predator about. Again, your Elder forbid I speak more than that."

The newcomer looked at her in puzzlement as he nibbled his peach. He drooped his tale. "Elder no like Biggens or Biggen things." He drooped his tail and looked about a moment. He then lowered his voice fearful it would carry. "My territory nearest to Biggens before you come. I watch. I see Biggens not all bad as he speak."

Blossom also lowered her voice in respect for his fear over what he stated as she flicked her tail up and down once in agreement. "No all Biggens bad. You still be careful near Biggens."

He flicked his tail up and down once in agreement and harvested another peach. As he nibbled, he looked at her again and asked, "How many winters you see? I see two."

"This my first summer," she replied.

He nearly dropped the peach he was nibbling at the answer. He stared at her long and hard for a moment. "You lie. You bigger than me."

She gigglechittered. "Remember, I smart squirrel and small Biggen both. Look at my sire," she pointed to Aldin with her tail. "He small Biggen. He bigger than many smart squirrels our forest."

He looked between her and Aldin and nibbled some more before speaking again, drooping his tail. "You so young. I will no ask what I think."

She understood what he dared not speak. "I can no seek mate among those in this forest. Your Elder forbid. I already have potential mate among our people. He will be here with me at Biggen learning place at harvest time."

He drooped his tail. "Elder mean forbid you like that. We need more females. Forest needs more squirrels."

"All forests need more squirrels. You need speak that with your Elder. I obey what he speak to me." She nibbled on another peach. "Potential mate and I can no start family while learning. We must wait. Is hard to wait."

The male sighedchittered but didn't press it further as he nibbled on another peach while keeping a wary eye on both of them.

"Our winter nest is in Biggen place." She pointed to the school with her tail. "You would no like as we will nest with many other Biggens. The Biggen teaching elder is Biggen fisher"

This time, the male dropped his mostly eaten peach as his eyes shot wide as his tail wigwagged back and forth rapidly. He tried to fight back a scree of fear, but not quite successfully. "You the one. You scree out warning of fisher," he held-up two claws, "days ago."

Blossom drooped her tail briefly before flicking it up and down once. "Yes, I meet Biggen fisher teaching elder two" she held-up two claws, "days ago. I so scared at first I flee screeing a warning. After I calm down I go back to him. We hug."

The male let forth another short scree of terror as his tail wigwagged back and forth. "How you live? Fishers hunt/kill/eat smart squirrels."

"He no hunt me. Biggen Elders forbid hunting of smart squirrels. You have nothing to fear if you ever see him. He good Biggen." She paused a moment and shuddered herself. "He scary looking." Now Blossom's tail wigwagged nervously. "He so big. Could eat you whole." Her tail wigwagged a bit more, but she forced it to slow down and took a few deep breaths to calm herself. "Even so, he good Biggen."

The newcomer needed a little bit to calm down. He finally shook off the fear and harvested another peach.

"Blossom," Aldin finally jumped in, "we need to finish exploring your new territory and head back soon."

Blossom looked over at her father. "Yes, Sire." She finished her peach.

"Blossom?" the male asked.

She flicked her tail up and down once. "Yes, our people take names like Biggens do. Is easier that way as we share territory." She pointed to herself with her tail. "My name is Blossom." She pointed to Aldin, "Sire's name is Friend. We must leave and return to our people. I will return at harvest time. You may tell others in territories near yours I grant truce for stonefruit trees. I would rather see them eaten then rot. Is bad let good food rot."

The male flicked his tail up and down once in agreement. He then bowed in thanks, grabbed another peach, and holding it carefully in his jaws darted back into the forest.

“You handled that well, Blossom. Hopefully, if, or more likely when the Elder hears, he’ll approve.”

“If what he said about a lack of females is true, Father, that could be a problem for me come late winter.”

Aldin gigglechittered. “I highly doubt it. They’d have to successfully chase off Saniel and impress you in the process.” He paused a moment, “and face School Master Pekan in order to nest with you.”

She thought about that for a moment and gigglechittered before replying, “True.”

“Ready to go home? Or do you want to explore the rest of your territory first?”

“I think I’ve seen enough.” She replied pointing to his backpack with her tail, which he pulled off and gave to her without her needing to ask verbally. She filled it with peaches as he summoned a hovercraft. “There, now I can share some with my brothers and Saniel. I’m sure Saniel will have the name for these in Common. They’re very good.”

“That they are,” he agreed harvesting one more as the hovercraft arrived.

The male nibbled on his peach, watching the two small Biggens from a distance. He observed a biggen flyer-thing arrive, the two of them leap into it, and the flyer flew off. He sighed heavily as he made his way back to the stonefruit trees for another stonefruit. It was terrible that she was a small Biggen and so young. He still couldn’t believe it. If only she was older, then he would take the risk of the Elder banishing him as what he spoke to them was true. Their forest didn’t have enough females.

FIFTEEN

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 chittered, 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.

SIXTEEN

Blossom wasted little time upon their return and quickly found Saniel. She pulled a peach out of the backpack to show him, telling him about the two trees near the school. His jaw dropped as he gave her the word in Common for the peach.

“They don’t normally grow around here. The winters are too cold and long.”

They shared the peach. Instead of dropping the pit, Blossom tucked it back in the pack. Saniel looked at her.

“In studying for the exam, I read how some Biggens breed new plant species. Maybe these peaches are like that and have been bred to withstand our winters. There’s one way to find out. We’ll save the pits and go plant them by the nearest cherry grove in what had been smart squirrel territory before The Refuge was created. Come, I want to share some with my brothers.”

Saniel drooped his tail. “I can join you later, but there are chores I must do for my parents right now. There is a lot of preparation to do before the butternut harvest in a few weeks. And we won’t be here to help then.”

“Alright.” They hugged briefly and Blossom made her way through the treetops in search of her siblings.

That evening in their shared drey, both Pinecone and Butternut drifted to sleep quickly. Aldin snuggled down between the two of them but remained awake. All three were, in turn, snuggled-up to Raoul in the oversize drey. He flinched slightly in startlement as Raoul gently brushed a paw through his fur. He didn’t dare do more than that for fear of waking up the other two.

“What is wrong, my potential mate brother?” Raoul asked quietly. “You seem wound-up.” Raoul patiently waited for a reply as Aldin was silent a moment in thought.

“I don’t know where to start, Raoul. I was expecting a short visit. Of course, I haven’t been a very good host so far, immediately leaving on business soon after you two arrived.” He sighchittered. “So much change, so quickly. I don’t know if I’m ready for this so soon. I figured you two would be here a few weeks and then go home. Then come next winter’s Parliament, you two would host me, Butternut would pull off her trick again, except she’d lead me off into the trees. She’d get her pups and...”

“And you’d be torn between two families. Maybe this is a better solution?”

Again, Aldin was silent for a moment in thought. “Yes, perhaps. I just didn’t expect this much change in the short time I was away in Rock City. I know we spoke your visit could be longer, but I feel caught off guard as I didn’t expect you two to quickly decide to move here.”

“Neither was I, but I had plans in place just in case. The Council of Elders, particularly Foxy, seemed to have other plans. While our great grandpups were helping me build this drey, Butternut spoke about her life story in brief at a meeting of many of the other squirrels here. That planted an idea in Foxy. Then when you and Blossom left, Foxy and Tassel approached Butternut asking her to stay and become a teacher. She’s all in on it. I haven’t seen her this happy and lively since...” he trailed off a moment in thought. “Well, since before the accident that changed her into a cousin smart squirrel.” He paused again in thought. “I think it will all work out in the end one way or another. Butternut briefed you on this morning’s meeting with the local education board. They’ve already asked to meet with us again tomorrow. I’m surprised at how quick the follow-up is. Right now, you need to relax and rest, potential mate brother. Butternut will want you present and alert.”

“I know I need to sleep. But there is so much racing through my head. It is hard to relax.”

“If you will allow me, Aldin, there is something I have done from time to time to help Butternut to relax since her return from Teacher’s old forest.” Again, he gently brushed one of his paws through Aldin’s fur across his back. This time, Aldin didn’t flinch. As he also didn’t protest about it, Raoul continued to gently pet him, kneading one paw into the back of his neck between the shoulders and then lightly stroking down his back. After a few ceclicks of being gently petted, Aldin relaxed and quickly fell asleep.

SEVENTEEN

The council gathered in Jessophat’s tree in front of his large flatpanel. Aldin, Butternut, and Raoul joined them. On the screen were the regional education governing board, a group of five citizens, beaver, otter, ferret, squirrel, and badger. A second gray squirrel with tasseled ears stood to one side. The otter spoke for the group as before. The second squirrel immediately repeated

what the otter stated in relatively good chitterspeak, saving Jessophat from needing to do so for Foxy.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet on such short notice and for your patience,” the otter stated.

“We contacted our counterparts in the other regional boards for help with your proposal. We didn’t expect such a quick decision ourselves, but a decision has been made. Ms. Butternut, it has been decided that you may teach in the format you have proposed,” the otter paused a moment.

“But?” Butternut suggested realizing why the otter paused.

The otter nodded. “Yes, there is a ‘but’ involved. As you are new to teaching the curriculum, you will need a mentor on site to watch, observe, and assist. Once the mentor is satisfied with your teaching skills, you’ll be allowed to teach on your own. With the mentor present, you may have a larger class.” The otter bowed to the second squirrel who was translating. “This is Hidget. She has volunteered to serve as your mentor. She has five years’ experience teaching the common curriculum on her own among various citizen species.” Hidget bowed after finishing the translation.

Butternut nodded and glanced at Aldin. “Embassador, would you mind going to the entrance of Jessophat’s home, connect your flatpanel’s camera to our connection with the committee, and show them what it looks like outside?”

Aldin scampered over to the entrance. He panned the camera around showing how high off the ground they were in Jessophat’s tree. There was some gasping from those on the committee. He returned to his spot behind the council.

Butternut smiled. “My turn for a ‘but’. As you can see, we’re not at ground level here. The classroom is still under construction in what will be our new home.” She gestured to Raoul, Pinecone, and Aldin with her tail. “It will be at about the same height as it would not be safe to have it at ground level due to predators. It also needs to be that height as Jessophat has warned me the snow is quite deep here in the winter. At one-point last winter it nearly reached the entrance of his home.”

There was some murmuring back and forth on screen. The gray furred tasseled ear squirrel drooped her tail briefly as the others all looked at her. Several members of the board were frowning. Hidget wigwagged her tail back and forth a few times before responding first in Common and then chitterspeak, “I’m still willing to do it. I should have known, but didn’t consider that as cousin squirrels, of course you’d be most comfortable up in the treetops.”

Butternut bowed in thanks. “Thank you, Hidget, for offering to serve as my mentor. Perhaps that could serve as your chitterspeak name, much like my husband goes by Curious.”

Mentor Hidget nodded. “I’ll accept that.”

“You’ll also need to grow-out your nails into claws, Mentor Hidget. You have about a month.”

Hidget's eyes shot wide. "Why?"

"Remember my warning," Butternut replied. "You're going to need to climb. How else do you plan to make it to class? We can provide a ladder short-term, but it'll be easier for you to climb using your claws."

"It is not as hard as you might think," Jessophat reassured Hidget. "Once you have the proper length claws, that is. You'll have plenty of assistance in learning. We'll have you climbing like you were born a cousin in no time."

Hidget closed her eyes briefly and quietly sighed, resigning herself to the changes. She then looked at the screen. "Understood. I'll arrive in a month."

"We'll contact you again, when it is closer to the date we'd like to start classes," Butternut concluded. "Thank you for your assistance and to all the councils involved in the process."

The screen went dark. Foxy screed-out in joy. She turned to Butternut and pulled her into an embrace.

EIGHTEEN

The morning after Blossom's return, Twig and Cherry Foxy arrived outside Sanial's and Blossom's shared drey. Sanial and Blossom were just finishing a couple of butternuts. Sanial glanced at one and then the other.

Twig looked downward briefly, grasping his tail. He used chitterspeak for Cherry's sake. "Cherry come to me the day Blossom go to Biggen colony and well..." He scuffed a paw.

"I hope it work for you two," Sanial replied in chitterspeak.

Blossom hugged her brother and then Cherry. "Energy, I invite them to come with us, plant stonefruit seeds." Blossom beckoned the group. "We go plant stonefruit seeds at near cherry grove. It will take many summers before they make fruit." She then quoted Elder Teacher, "Is our job to plant trees for those who come after us."

The others flicked their tails up and down once in agreement. It was a half-pawspan to the nearest cherry grove, the small one Cherry and her family had first harvested cherries in. To one end, there were several small mounds as others had planted cherry pits during the harvest here just like in the other groves. They paused in the canopy of one of the cherry trees looking about.

"Remember what happened to poor Sorel at the end of the cherry harvest," Sanial warned the others.

The three cousin squirrels wigwagged their tails nervously.

“I go to other side of clearing and keep watch from there,” Cherry said. She looked at Blossom and Saniel. “You go first. Twig and I watch for predators.”

The others flicked their tails up and down once. Cherry quickly made her way through the trees to the other side of the small clearing. She looked about carefully. “Clear,” she called out.

Twig looked about as did the others. “Clear,” he said to them.

“Remember what I looked up on the world network, Blossom. We need to plant the pits pointy end down.”

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once. They each took a peach pit in their mouths and made their way down to the ground. From there, they paced off about ten cousin squirrel body lengths out past the fresh mounds. Each of them were about the same distance from each other as from the nearest row of fresh mounds. They each dug into the ground with their front paws. They paused, looking about nervously and then stuck their heads into the holes to deposit their respective pits. Upon pulling out, they brushed the dirt back over the peach pit and gently patted the ground. They quickly scampered back up the cherry tree rejoining Twig. Cherry was soon among them again.

“That was fun,” Saniel said. “It felt natural to bury that pit just as I watched Pinecone bury butternuts during past harvest times.”

All three cousin squirrels looked at him.

“You see twelve winters and no bury nuts before?” Twig asked raising his tail briefly in a curl.

Saniel wigwagged his tail left to right and left again in the negative. “My family store nuts in our tree for food and to trade with other Biggens. Sire and Dame use Biggen tools to plant nuts to grow new trees. I no bury nuts by paw before.”

They nodded in understanding.

“How long for stonefruit trees to grow?” Cherry asked.

“Like cherries,” Saniel answered, “need ten summers maybe more before stonefruit start produce fruit.”

“Long time,” she replied.

The others flicked their tails up and down once in agreement.

Blossom looked at Twig and Cherry. “Your turn plant stonefruit. Energy and I keep watch.”

Without being asked, Saniel made his way quickly to the spot on the other side of the clearing. "Clear," he called-out.

The three cousins looked about from the cherry tree they were in. "Clear," Blossom said.

Twig and Cherry made their way down the tree and out past the new mounds, pacing off as Saniel and Blossom had done. They looked about again wigwagging their tails nervously before burying their respective peach pits and gently patting the dirt into place.

"CHIT! CHITTER! SCREE! FOX! FOX! FOX!" Blossom cried-out. "RIGHT UNDER ME! FLEE TOWARDS ENERGY! CHIT! SCREE!!!!"

Twig and Cherry bolted towards the other end of the clearing. The fox was quickly behind them trying to snap at one tail and then the other. To their surprise, Saniel was quickly down his tree and ran past them straight at the predator. Fear drove them onward and up the tree. They cried out a warning of their own as they climbed quickly.

Saniel chittergrowled as he barreled into the fox. The fox yelped in surprise as the two tumbled end over end. Fur flew in the air. The fight seemed to end before it started with Saniel landing on top. He had the fox pinned to the ground with his mouth around its neck. The fox whimpered. It was on the small side for a cousin fox, barely larger than Saniel from nose-tip to base of tail. However, Saniel outweighed it. Another chittergrowl came out of Saniel as the fox tried to struggle briefly. It ceased struggling and whimpered again as Saniel tightened his mouth slightly. He panted heavily trying to catch his breath before delivering the killing blow.

"Saniel," Blossom called down in Common. "Twig and Cherry are safe. Please don't kill it."

Saniel couldn't believe what he heard. This fox may have been the one who killed Sorel and it had just tried to make her brother and his potential mate it's breakfast. Why should he spare it? He grabbed the fox by the scruff of the neck with his right forepaw/hand and stood-up, opening his mouth to release the fox's neck. As he stood up to his full Biggen height, he held it out by the scruff and barely had it off the ground. Again, it whimpered. However, it made no attempt to struggle.

Twig and Cherry both stared as they wigwagged their tails in fear and uttered another scree warning. Both had forgotten how big Saniel could be if he stood up on just his hind paws. It was not something he did often in The Refuge. He preferred to scamper about cousin-style on all four. Their scree set-off Blossom for a moment who let out a warning scree of her own as her tail also began to wigwag.

Saniel walked over to the base of the tree, fox in paw. He looked up at Blossom and the others in the cherry tree. "I don't understand, Blossom," he called up to her in Common. Twig between fear screees quietly translated for Cherry. "Why should I spare this fox." He gestured waving the fox slightly about. "It just tried to hunt your brother and his potential mate."

The fox whimpered again as the giant squirrel that held it uttered its strange sounds and shook it. It lost control of its bowels and bladder. Saniel wrinkled his nose as he was barely missed by the excrement coming out of the fox. “Arrgh! That reeks worse than skunk musk!”

“Saniel, it has no choice. It must hunt to live. As our parents teach us, we are prey. At some point a predator might catch and eat us.” Her tail shuddered. “We try our best to ensure that does not happen for as long as possible.”

Twig and Cherry flicked their tails up and down once in agreement. Both uttered another fear scree.

“And if I let it go, it might get you or one of your brothers tomorrow, Blossom.”

“I doubt it will stay in this area after this. As I studied for the senior school exam, most cousin species fear Biggens. It will flee when you release it. Look how scared it is right now. Also, remember the rules of our colony. If you hunt/kill it now when it is not in self-defense or saving someone else, you must eat your kill.”

Saniel drooped his tail as he stared at the fox in his grip. It whined again. He sighed. “You’re right, Blossom. But there is one thing I will do before I let it go.” He grabbed the fox’s muzzle with his left hand. It struggled unsuccessfully as he leaned over and nipped off the tip of its left ear with his incisors. The fox yelped. Saniel released the fox while leaping upward grabbing onto the tree trunk and quickly climbed, joining the others.

As Blossom predicted, the fox did not hesitate once released. It fled from the grove away from the direction of the populated portion of The Refuge. Saniel spat out the small ear tip. Blossom hugged Saniel. Twig and Cherry then each hugged him in thanks.

“That very brave thing you do, hunt then spare fox life,” Cherry chattered as she released Saniel from the hug.

“Why you bite off part of its ear?” Twig asked in chitterspeak.

“If another squirrel get hunted. I want know if same fox,” Saniel replied in chitterspeak. “If same,” his eyes narrowed a moment, “I will hunt/kill/eat it next time. Your namesake, Twig, saved my life last summer. It cost him his.” Saniel drooped his tail and fought back tears as he switched back to Common. “Now that I’m near full grown, if I can help it, no others will fall prey to predators in our forest.” The tears began to flow. “I wish I had been with Sorel’s group that day...” he trailed off as he began to sob.

They bowed to him in understanding. Blossom embraced the larger squirrel who wept into her shoulder. Soon all four of them were crying remembering the loss. Eventually, they all calmed down.

“Come, we must report this to Elders and warn others,” Blossom stated still sniffing a little.

NINETEEN-Epilogue

Two days later, the Council met and turned to Raoul. Without being verbally asked, he spoke.

“I spent all morning collecting the traps I laid out across the forest and counted the small rodents found in each trap and released them. Like in Teacher’s previous forest, there were fewer small rodents in each trap than there should have been. With small rodents in decline, predators who normally hunt them, will now try and hunt you more.” He paused a moment realizing he said all of that in Common and then translated it loosely in Chitterspeak.

Foxy bowed in thanks. “You may use Biggenspeak, Curious. It help me learn. I ask if I no understand.”

Raoul looked towards Tassel and Teacher. Both nodded and flicked their tails up and down once. He didn’t need to ask Pinecone, who he knew understood Common.

“Thank you,” Raoul continued in Common. “As you know, Biggenspeak has more words.”

The four cousin squirrels each flicked their tails up and down once, while Jessophat nodded.

“What we do?” Foxy asked raising her tail briefly in a curl.

“I will try contacting local Biggens who hunt small rodents as I did when I lived near Teacher’s old forest. Small rodents are a big problem for Biggens. Not many Biggen predators like to hunt/kill them. With no predators preying on them, they grow in numbers quickly in Biggen areas. If locally it is like back near Teacher’s old forest, those who do hunt them have more to kill then they or other Biggens can eat. I think they would gladly release them alive in this forest, starting in the two cherry groves were the fox encounters have occurred.”

The Council members glanced at each other. All raised their tails.

Tassel looked directly at the citizen raccoon. “Curious, we ask you to speak to small rodent hunters near here. Kind will assist if you need help. We grant permission to Biggens who hunt small rodents to release them in our forest.”

Raoul bowed accepting the assignment. The Council dispersed into the canopy leaving just him and Jessophat. Raoul turned to the Citizen squirrel. “Do you know of any reputable exterminators within a klick hovercraft trip from here?”

Jessophat smiled while slowly wigwagging his tail. “I know of a couple. I’ll place some calls as I know you’re busy overseeing the construction of your new home and school. If I find interest, I’ll let you know and let you follow-up.”

“Thank you.”

That evening, a hovercraft arrived outside Jessophat's home. Raoul was there to greet the occupant, a weasel named Choran. They shook paws and exchanged pleasantries.

"Normally, people hire me to get rid of small rodents, not to bring small rodents to them, Dr. Kaynobble." Choran looked about nervously. "It is safe to be here, right? Do we have permission to be here? I remember the recorded warning given to Parliament this past spring."

"I assure you that permission has been granted for you to be here, Choran." Raoul looked up into the canopy and chittered, surprising the weasel.

A chitter came back from the canopy and a squirrel descended into sight of both Biggens. Pinecone pulled her flatpanel off her back and started typing quickly on it. The device spoke her typed words for her. "I am Pinecone, a member of the Council of Elders for The Refuge. That's like a member of one of your town councils, Mr. Choran. I have been watching and observing from further up this tree since you arrived. You have permission to visit our forest and leave behind all the live small rodents you wish." His flatpanel chirped briefly. "That's a message from me with a written statement stating you have permission. Raoul will show you where to start."

Raoul bowed towards Pinecone. "Thank you, Elder Pinecone."

Choran followed the raccoon's gesture, bowing and thanking Pinecone.

Pinecone likewise bowed and typed away some more. "It is us who should thank you, Mr. Choran. With more small rodents in our forest, the predators who hunt them will leave us alone, hopefully." She tucked the flatpanel back on her back and scooted back up the tree, quickly vanishing from sight.

Choran raised one eyebrow briefly and turned to Raoul. "Should I use your first name as Elder Pinecone did?"

"Please do," Raoul replied. "Do you have any small rodents caged up with you today or do you just want to see where to leave the first batch when you do have some?"

"This is for real then, right? The cousin squirrels here want me to dump my excess catch in their forest?"

Raoul nodded. "It is just as Jessophat and I explained to you through video call earlier today and as you just heard Elder Pinecone state. The small rodent population in this forest has decreased. Cousin predator species that rely on them in their diet are turning to hunting cousin squirrels. They lost one half-grown pup to a fox a little over a week ago and almost lost two more a few days ago, including one of Ambassador Aldin's and Elder Pinecone's sons."

Choran's eyes widened a moment. "Very well. I just happen to have a cage full in the hovercraft."

“Great. I’ll show you were to take them. The permission granted to you will continue each time you return with more to release.”

Raoul showed him the spots to start at. Choran released his first batch of small rodents in the nearest cherry grove. After they parted ways, Choran had a lot of time to think on the trip home. Having a dumping ground for his catch would be very helpful financially. There was a cost involved with having to dispose of small rodent bodies beyond what he or others interested could eat. On the other paw, there was his cousin he was close to. Sadly, that cousin didn’t think cousin squirrels should be treated the same as citizen species. He did not want his cousin to learn of how he was now aiding the cousin squirrels of The Refuge. He had a lot to think about.