

TWENTY-SEVEN

Brave arrived at the designated tree soon after finishing breakfast. He nervously wigwagged his tail while bowing to the tasseled ear reddish-orange fur squirrel who was waiting for him. They sniffed each other briefly.

“You no need fear me, Brave,” Foxy said. “I once as scared as you. Come, we go in Elder Kind’s and Sunshine’s nest home for this lesson.”

She led him into Jessophat’s and Carulin’s home. Brave gazed around. It was similar to the tree home he was staying in. Foxy scampered over to a space with a large flatpanel on the wall and sat on a cushion.

“Where are others?” Brave asked as he sat on a different cushion near her.

“Most others who chose learn Elder things have learned what you will learn today, Brave,” Foxy replied. “We wait for one other squirrel to begin.”

Not long after she spoke, a chime sounded from the large flatpanel. Foxy tapped an icon on her small flatpanel and the large panel lit showing Brave’s dame. Both Brave and his mother gasped upon seeing each other.

“My pup!?! I know you speak you start learn Elder things. I no expect you and I learn at same time.”

Foxy bowed to the squirrel on screen. “Elder...”

“Elder Foxy, I chose name, Hope.”

“Is good name,” Foxy replied.

Brave wigwagged the tip of his tail up and down once. “Yes, is good name, Dame Hope.”

Two other squirrels appeared on either side of Hope. “These two no chose names yet. They see same number of winters as me. I have asked them to learn Elder things with me. And they agree.”

The two other squirrels nervously wigwagged their tails as they gazed at the image on Hope’s smaller flatpanel.

Foxy flicked her tail up and down once. “Is good. No one squirrel should be elder all alone. Today, I teach what you should have learned first, Hope, as your pup shall learn, and you two other new Elders.”

“New Elders? We no Elders yet,” the two squirrels on either side of Hope glanced at each other and back at the image on the flatpanel.

Foxy chittered in amusement without giggling. “I felt the same way when my old Elder ask me to start learn Elder things. Once you asked in that way and you agree, in most forests you are then an Elder, though you have much to learn.”

They bowed their heads in understanding.

“I no learn this first either as Elder my old forest choose teach other Elder things first. Teacher no teach this to you first, Hope, as things he teach you first instead you need right off as head Elder. Normally, one begins to learn Elder things before one must become Elder.”

The squirrels to either side of Hope raised their tails and waited for Foxy to allow them to speak. She nodded to them.

“You just speak normally one begins to learn Elder things before they must become Elder. Yet, you call us new Elders.”

Foxy flicked her tail up and down once. “Hope, why you ask these two to learn Elder things?”

Hope glanced down a moment, scuffing a paw, then looked first to the two squirrels next to her and then at the flatpanel. “As Elder is too much to do all alone in this forest. I know I need help.” She looked at the other two next to her again. “And I know you two will be good Elders as I try to be.”

Both bowed to Hope in thanks. “We will try our best,” both stated.

“If we are ready?” Foxy asked. When the others flicked their tails up and down once, she explained to them as Teacher had explained to Parliament about the real reasons the first Elders order smart squirrels forget Biggen things in order to save new young forests. How for countless generations they try to become dumb squirrels but remain smart. All of her pupils’ tails were thrashing about. Well, in Brave’s case, just the tip.

“We forget so much and for what?” Hope asked. “How long have smart squirrels try to become dumb?”

“I would stand here all day flashing my claws, Hope, new Elders, and Brave.”

“Biggen squirrel, Energy, teach me chitterspeak in place of claws for count one through ten!” Brave jumped in excitedly.

“He has?” Foxy asked.

Brave flicked his tailtip up and down once. “It was one of the things we speak about when he help me at harvest time.”

“Good. Then is your turn to teach, Brave. Teach your Dame and other two Elders chitterspeak for one through ten.”

Brave did so. Hope and the other two were amazed and thrilled to learn new chitterspeak count words.

“Very good, Brave,” Foxy praised him. “And so, we in this forest have started to try and relearn what we have forgotten. While Biggenspeak have more words, as we’ve learned from Elder Voice Friend, we have forgotten some chitterspeak too. Important chitterspeak such as this. Counting without need of claws. Now, if I speak there are three smart squirrels in your forest learning Elder things and one here,” she pointed to Brave with her tail. “That is how many?”

“Four,” all three on screen replied, but out of habit held up four claws too.

“Excellent. If seven more squirrels were to join us that would be?”

There was a pause on screen as the three squirrels looked at each other and their claws for a moment. Brave went to answer, but Foxy stopped him with a glance. Finally, Hope looked at the flatpanel. “Ten and one?”

Foxy flicked her tail up and down once. “Add nine more to that and you get?”

There was little hesitation. “Ten and ten?” Hope replied. The squirrel to her left jumped in. “Two tens?!”

Foxy flicked her tail up and down again. “Excellent. Yes, two tens. Is like flashing all ten claws two times, right?”

The squirrels on screen nodded. “Yes, I can see how this is easier than flashing claws,” the squirrel to Hope’s right chimed in.

“Good. Now we go bigger.” Foxy glanced briefly at Brave, “And I no know if Energy teach this to you, Brave. Last summer Friend teach us two more bigger count words and you will understand how important they are soon after. First, one hundred which is ten tens.”

“All ten claws flashed ten times?” Brave asked.

Foxy flicked her tail up and down once.

Brave nodded. “Is big number. Biggen fox healing elder speak he put near hundred of those little knot tools in my skin to hold wounds together to heal.”

The others agreed that one hundred was a big number.

Foxy chattered in amusement. “Is no as big as next number. One thousand. Is ten hundreds.”

The eyes of the others widened briefly thinking how big that was.

“How Friend make sure I understand that number, he ask me how many nuts I must store for winter.”

Hope and the others glanced at each other for a moment as they quickly did the math in their head and again their eyes widened briefly. “Three thousands...”

“and five hundreds,” Brave added.

All four agreed it was a very big number. And all understood how useful it was to have chitterspeak words for them.

“We,” Hope glanced at the two squirrels with her, “will make sure all in our forest learn these new chitterspeak count words. Is very important.”

Foxy nodded. “Good. Now I teach you these words because you ask how long we try to become dumb squirrels. Last spring Biggens think they now know how long-ago great fire in Biggen origin story was. Is very, very big number.” Foxy spoke the next part slowly. “One hundred thousand winters ago.”

This time the others stared at her with wide eyes for a full ceclick in time as they tried to comprehend such a large number.

“As we eat nearly as many nuts in winter as other three seasons combined,” Brave stated. “It would take all five of us three harvest times, winters, springs and summers to gather and eat as many nuts as that is winters ago,” Brave finished shaking his head in disbelief. “Is very, very big number and very, very long time.”

The others flicked their tails up and down once. Hope suddenly chattered in anger. “And we have been trying that long to become dumb squirrels! And we still smart! I think it no possible for smart squirrels to become dumb as old Elder ordered so very, very long ago!”

“Correct, Hope,” Foxy replied. “And even with no knowing those big numbers at the time, I felt as upset as you do now when I first figured that out.”

“One hundred thousands winters,” the squirrel to Hope’s right stated and shook her head. “And all we do is forget some chitterspeak words and make Biggens think we dumb. That is why some hunt us until recently.”

Foxy again flicked her tail up and down once. “Until Pinecone bravely speak to head Biggen Elders summer before last winter. Once Biggen Elders learn we smart like them, they make new rules.” Foxy went over the laws put forth recognizing smart squirrels as equals to Biggens. “It is because of those rules Biggens help remove your old Elder. And why Biggen healer take care of Brave.”

All four flicked their tails up and down once in understanding.

“New Biggen rules is one reason why squirrels here form colony something like how Biggens live, always at truce, but still in forest. Is why we decide any squirrel who wish to learn Elder things may or who wish to learn Biggen things may. Old Elder from long ago who make rule to make us dumb no know what he/she demand. Is no possible. So, we decide here we should relearn that which we forgot.”

“Are you saying we must do same?” Hope asked raising her tail in a curl briefly.

Foxy wigwagged her tail left to right and back once. “No. Squirrels in each forest must choose what works for them. I must go into history this forest and my old forest a little to explain why we choose what we do here. Here, giant night predator birds hunt kill most squirrels. Birds so big can eat squirrel whole!” The others shuddered. “Squirrels here try follow old ways to avoid birds. They stop going out of nests within handspan of sunrise and sunset. Birds change their ways and still hunt kill in middle of day! It take two brave squirrels to hunt and kill the birds. One, Elder Pinecone’s first mate, die doing so. He save Energy from being hunt killed. Is why Energy’s family join their territory with smart squirrels and all share now. Friend kill other and eat part of it.”

The others stared at her. “Elder Voice Friend eat predator bird?”

“As spoke to me, he eat part. It all he could eat. It was very big bird. Is his people’s rule. You kill, you eat your kill. Here rule close to same. No must eat if kill try save others.”

Hope and the others flicked their tails up and down once. “Is good rule. Same in forests we flee to until old Elder removed. We chose use same rule here.”

Foxy drooped her tail as a few tears welled in her eyes. “Now I speak of my old forest. Bad Biggens come to my forest. They hunt kill some smart squirrels who try to greet them due to new Biggen rules. Bad Biggens then set fire to forest. Only those of us who remember Biggen origin story survive as we fight off flee panic instinct long enough to scurry down woodchuck holes. Forest was destroyed. Good Biggens come and collect those of us who survive. As eldest survivor I became Elder though I no ready. I speak on Biggen viewer with Elder Teacher. He offer we come here to live though it different here or we could go to forest where his pup of pup of pup is one of the Elders and live as we did before fire.”

“Did you choose for all?” Hope asked.

Foxy wigwagged her tail left to right and back once. “Is too important thing to choose for others. I explain choices to others. All choose to follow me here speaking I their Elder, they follow where I go.” She paused. “That important lesson. As Elder, others look up to you. They will follow your lead even when you give them choose. Is big burden. If you choose wrong, others may be hurt or die.” She moved back to her tale. “Since we join this colony, we have helped make it stronger than before. Late winter will mark the colony’s first full cycle of seasons trying

this. Those who came with me from burned forest will be here one full cycle of seasons mid-spring. Will we do better here? Time will tell. I hope so.”

The others nodded. It was a lot to think about.

“And that is all the Elder things I teach today.”

Brave, Hope and the other two bowed in thanks.

Foxy glanced towards the entrance. “And I time that good. Snow has started to fall. We lose the energy needed to make Biggen viewers work soon. Snow will cover biggen tools at top of tree that make energy from sunlight.”

“We no have those.”

“You close to large Biggen colony. You share their energy you no need own biggen energy make tool like us. Biggen colony near us too small to share. Is why we need energy make tool.”

“Before we end call, I must ask one thing of my Dame,” Brave said. He turned to the screen. “I ask this of you as my elder, Elder Hope, and no as my dame. Blossom can Biggenspeak just like her sire. I think when time comes and we raise family, our pups will also be able to Biggenspeak. I should learn to hear Biggenspeak so I understand them. There is a Biggen raccoon here, Curious, who good at chitterspeak. He speak he could teach me to use Biggen viewer like Blossom’s Dame, Elder Pinecone. Biggenspeak has symbols as you know as you and I use some to call each other. If you choose right symbols on viewer it will Biggenspeak for you. May I learn Biggenspeak?”

Hope did not hesitate in her answer. “Brave, is good you ask. I can no answer that as I am your Dame.” She glanced at the other two. “Now you see why I need others to serve as Elders with me?”

They flicked their tails up and down once. “We discuss a moment.” Hope muted her flatpanel. Brave and Foxy could see on screen the other two speak together. Eventually, they raised their tails. Hope unmuted the flatpanel. The squirrel to Hope’s left replied, “As your pups will be able to Biggenspeak is important you understand your pups, Brave. You now live in other forest where rules different than rules here. We no stop you. You may learn Biggenspeak as permitted in that forest. If you return to this forest, we will no banish you for learning Biggenspeak. We would no be good Elders if we try punish you for wanting to understand your pups.”

Brave bowed in thanks.

“That is another thing you may need to discuss among yourselves,” Foxy added. “Here Elders decide we Elders must learn hear Biggenspeak and use Biggen viewers to Biggenspeak for us as we work with Biggens. Biggen viewer can listen to Biggenspeak and repeat in chitterspeak and other way.” Foxy sighed. “As you know now, Biggenspeak has more words. Things lost going between two.”

Hope and the other two flicked their tails up and down once. “Yes, is something we will discuss over winter as we live near Biggen pup learning place and we have granted them permission to bring Biggens pups into our forest to learn about forest.”