

“...And that is what I have to share with you today,” Tassel wrapped up the elder lesson with Brave, and with his mother, Hope, Grace, and Charity on the large flatpanel. Foxy sat quietly as she had come into the room mid-lesson. Though Foxy had already learned what Tassel taught today, she thought it was always helpful to hear a lesson more than once.

Those on screen and Brave bowed in thanks. The screen went dark.

Brave turned to Tassel. “I have a question, Elder Tassel, and I no know if you can answer,” He paused until she nodded and he continued. “Why are the squirrels here at The Refuge bigger compared to others?” He looked down briefly scuffing a paw. “Well, at least those born and raised here.”

“Bigger?”

“Yes. No much bigger, but you are bigger.” He scooted over next to her, sat up and showed that he was two claws shorter than she was. He gestured to Foxy to come over. She sat up next to him, and Brave showed that she and he were about the same size.

“I see this through all of The Refuge. Those born and raised here are bigger. Blossom and her litter mates are bigger still. If one of them were to sit next to you they would be another claw taller than you. Blossom believes it is because her sire is big for a squirrel.”

Tassel drooped her tail. “I no notice this before. I no have answer.”

“I no notice this either,” Foxy replied. “You very observant, Brave.” She pondered for a moment, her tail slowly wigwagging back and forth. “You know who might know the answer?” she suddenly blurted out. “Curious. Most Biggens spend long time learning about one thing. He learn all he can about smart squirrels. Maybe he know.”

Tassel flicked his tail up and down once. “Is good idea. We go find Curious.”

The two elders took their time crossing from Carulin and Jessophat’s tree to the tree Raoul, Butternut, Pinecone, and Aldin shared that also had the school in it. They took their time so as to not leave Brave behind. The casts on his forelimb and tail slowed him down even on the easy route between the two trees.

“It snow soon. I can smell it in the air,” Tassel observed.

“Again?” Brave asked. “I already see more snow here than last winter in my old forest. It deeper than Curious is tall now! And we no see shortest day yet!”

Foxy flicked her tail up and down once. “It snow in my old forest. What fall here so far is what we see in normal winter there. Tassel and others warn us who are new here. This is normal in this forest. Last winter snow almost reach entrance to Kind and Sunshine’s nest tree.”

Brave stopped a moment and stared at Foxy and Tassel. “I thought Blossom pulling my tail when she speak that.”

Tassel glanced back at him. “Is true. I live here my whole life. Snow fall long and deep here. Is one reason we gather so much food for winter. Winter very long here.”

They soon arrived at the other nest tree and found Raoul sitting at the dining table quietly dictating to his flatpanel. When he saw them, he ceased and tucked the panel on his hip fur.

He bowed to them. “Greetings Elders Tassel and Foxy,” he bowed and then looked over at Brave, “and Brave.”

They bowed back. Tassel and Foxy still felt a little uneasy around the huge-to-them Biggen, but they knew he was no threat to them. It helped that his scent was a mix of Biggen raccoon and smart squirrel due to his smart squirrel mate, Butternut.

Brave broke the brief silence as he began to chitterspeak, “Curious...”

Raoul cut him off speaking in Common. “Remember, use Biggenspeak as much as you can with me. You asked me to help you learn it. How else will you learn it unless you use it?”

Brave drooped his tail, pulled his flatpanel off his back and typed away. The flatpanel spoke for him. “My apologies. Is hard to remember to do so, Raoul.”

“That is how you’ll get better at it. I will repeat in chitterspeak if you do not understand something.” He pointed to the two Elders. “I know the Elders can hear Common.”

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

Brave typed away. “I asked Elder Tassel a question and she did no have answer. She speak you might know.”

“She did not have an answer. She said you might know.”

Brave bowed his head and continued to type. “Yes,” he twitched his tail tip up and down. “Thank you for the correction. She did not have an answer. She said you might now. Why are the smart squirrels born and raised here in The Refuge bigger than other smart squirrels?”

Raoul raised an eyebrow briefly. “That’s an excellent question, Brave. They are bigger here?”

Brave and Foxy sat up next to Tassel to show she was a little taller. Brave held his good right forelimb up and showed Tassel was two claws larger than him and Foxy.

Raoul shook his head. “I had not noticed.”

Brave typed some more. “All those who grow-up here are a little bigger, some more than others.”

“I don’t have a firm answer. All I can give you is a theory.”

“Thee-o-re? What is that?”

“There is no word in chitterspeak for the word theory. It means an educated guess.” He paused a moment. “Before I give you my theory, I have a question for you as you have observed some are bigger here. Have you also observed what is different about this forest compared to your home forest, Brave?”

“More and bigger trees.”

“And”

Brave thought for a moment and typed. “More butternut trees.” His eyes lit-up. “Much of the part of forest I can climb with these casts are huge butternut trees.”

“Excellent. Yes, a large part of this forest is butternut trees,” Raoul replied. “Ancient ones at that. This one we are in is at least,” Raoul paused a moment. “Have you been taught large count words?”

Both Elders flicked their tails up and down once. Brave wigwagged the tip of his and nodded up and down.

“Ten tens is a hundred,” Foxy type-replied realizing she should get some Biggenspeak practice in too.

“Ten hundreds is a thousand,” Tassel typed.

“Biggens believe fire that eat world was hundred thousand winters ago. Is long, long time ago,” Brave added.

“Wow. I’m impressed you’ve learned that last part. This tree we’re in is about two thousand years old, maybe older.”

All three stared at the biggen raccoon in surprise.

“I can show you sometime how Biggens can determine that. But I’m going off topic. Yes, there are more butternut trees here and they are very old and huge. As such, each tree grows a lot of butternuts each year. Butternuts are nutrient rich.” He elaborated based on the looks of the muzzles of all three squirrels. “Fancy Biggen word for body fuel. Butternuts are one of the best foods on Earth. I could get all the energy I need for my body by eating half your weight in butternuts every day.” He pulled a butternut out of a bowl on the table. It was close to the size of a Terran walnut. “It is hard to describe in terms you will understand. Different foods have

different nutrients. Your body needs specific types of nutrients in certain amounts each day to work properly.” He paused a moment before continuing. “Butternuts are unusual as they have all of them. Most foods do not.”

He tossed the butternut in the air, caught it and set it on the table. He pulled two more out and set them with it. “As you grow from pup to adulthood, you need a lot of nutrients for that growth.” He pulled some acorns, hazelnuts, and some other seed out of the bowl and set them in their own group near the butternuts. The second pile was a little more than twice as large as the pile of butternuts. He pointed to the larger pile. “You have to eat all of this for your body to get the same amount of nutrients as eating just these three butternuts. Yet, you won’t feel as full eating those three butternuts as you would eating this other pile of food.”

“My theory is that because pups here eat a lot of butternuts, they have more nutrients/energy that enable them to grow bigger.”

All three squirrels’ eyes grew wide a moment as what Raoul explained sunk in. Before they could say anything, Raoul continued. “I have a second theory. A crazy one as I have no way to prove it. In your origin story, there were those who refused to forget the knowledge of the old Biggens. The ones who were banished. They eventually became like me, the current Biggens. Have you ever wondered how they grew larger over time?” He paused briefly again. “Maybe it was like how smart squirrels lost the ability to Biggenspeak. Maybe the biggest among them mated together. But what if they also made sure their pups ate lots and lots of butternuts? And that’s how Biggens grew bigger and bigger over time.”

The three squirrels looked to each other and then again at the biggen raccoon. All three showed tension in their body language as their tails wigwagged slowly back and forth betraying their fear and nervousness at what Raoul just said.

Finally, Foxy typed on her flatpanel. “Is good guess It would explain how you Biggens became Biggens if true.” Her tail wigwagged back and forth nervously some more. “Does that mean in time, smart squirrels here in The Refuge will turn into Biggens?”

Raoul chuckled. “Maybe, but it would take many thousands of years, I think.” He picked up one of the butternuts. “Probably the amount of time it would take this butternut if planted to grow into a tree as large as this one. Maybe longer. Such changes take thousands of generations to happen.” He watched as all three visibly relaxed.

“That said, you and I, Brave, need to leave in a klick for your doctor appointment in Rock City.” He turned to the two Elders. “We’ll be gone overnight. As you know, it’s two klicks by hovercraft to get there. By the time his appointment is over, there won’t be enough time to get home before dark.”

Aldin bounded in as Raoul finished speaking. “Good, you are here, Brave. Hello Raoul, Greetings Elders.” He bowed to them. “There’s a big snowstorm coming. Citizen weather satellites show it’ll start in the next half-klick. Brave needs to leave now or he might not make his appointment.”

Raoul sighed. “I have a meeting with...”

Aldin stopped him. “Don’t worry about it. I can take him.” He glanced towards Brave, “provided he doesn’t mind it being me instead.”

Brave nodded. He typed on his flatpanel. “Thank you for the offer, Raoul. I know how important your time is. Aldin will take me. Thank you, Aldin for offering to take me in his place. I hoping they take these casts off.”

“I am hoping,” Raoul corrected out of habit.