

ONE

Saniel hugged his parents and strapped a knapsack onto his back. “Are you sure, you don’t need me for the fall harvest. think the school would grant a delay for me if I’m needed.”

Jessophat chuckled. “We literally have over a hundred helpers now, Saniel. Get going.”

Carolyn sniffled. “Call us often.”

“I will, Mom,” Saniel answered as he hugged his mother again.

Blossom wigwagged her tail nervously as she embraced her parents and then her three brothers. “I’m going to miss the fall harvest. I could ask Schoolmaster Pekan for a delay.”

“You’re the one who was so determined to join Saniel,” Aldin replied as he hugged her again. “You’re going to be busy enough harvesting your new territory. While they will have food for you at school, it may not be what you like or can eat all the time. We’ll be able to handle the harvest here just fine with you away, Blossom. Of course, it’s not too late to change your mind, stay, help with the harvest, and wait until spring to start senior school.”

Blossom didn’t hesitate in her reply. “No, I don’t want to wait until spring. I feel I need to do this.”

Pinecone embraced her a second time. “Go my pup, be with your potential mate. There will be plenty food when you return for winter break.” She glanced at Aldin. “That what it called?”

Aldin flicked his tail up and down once.

Blossom put on her backpack. She made her way through the tree canopy to Saniel’s family tree, where he was waiting for her. A hovercraft soon arrived. They both got in and set their backpacks to one side. Saniel let Blossom put in the commands to take them to Rock City. Before she could hit ‘execute’, Saniel caught her attention and pointed up with his tail. She looked up through the clear dome in surprise as the canopy around them was filled with the members of The Refuge, all of whom waved to the two. They waved back. Blossom hit ‘execute’ and the hovercraft sped-off.

They were almost at Rock City when Blossom drooped her tail. She was reading through the school rules on her flatpanel and looked up at Saniel.

“It says here we can’t be roommates at school. We’ll be assigned roommates of the same gender.”

Saniel nodded. "I thought you had read about that already." He leaned over her shoulder and scrolled through the rules and pointed to a different section. "With permission of your roommate, you can have a guest spend the night. But I won't be asking mine right off. I suggest you do likewise. We each need to get to know our respective roommates first."

Blossom sighed, but accepted she wouldn't be able to snuggle with him at night for a while.

The hovercraft slowed as it entered the city and whisked them to near the entrance to the school before settling to the ground. After checking in, Saniel escorted Blossom to her assigned room. It happened to be just down the hall from his room. Blossom waived her paw over the lock mechanism and the door opened. She already knew the layout thanks to the tour the previous month. Two bed-hammocks, two desks with sitting cushions, a small fridge, and an entertainment panel. The window showed she was on the side of the building facing her 'territory'.

"See you at dinner," Saniel said as he hugged her briefly.

"Yes. Thank you, Saniel." She nuzzled him.

He turned to leave. As he stepped through the door, he nearly collided with an orangish-brown furred squirrel with tasseled ears, nimbly avoiding the collision at the last possible second, startling the other squirrel.

"Excuse me, I didn't realize you were right there," he apologized. "I'm Saniel." He offered a handpaw.

The other squirrel accepted the offered paw and looked at him carefully. "Moselyn. I thought you were going to knock into me. How were you able to avoid the collision?"

Saniel gigglechittered. "I channeled my inner cousin squirrel. Anyway, I'm sure I'll see you again soon." He waved to Blossom and headed down the hallway to his room.

Moselyn stared after him for a moment, before turning back to the doorway and entering her room. "Well, he's handsome," she quipped before noticing Blossom. "Oh."

Blossom bowed and offered her a forepaw. "Blossom. I heard you introduce yourself to my boyfriend as Moselyn. I guess we've been assigned as roommates."

She accepted the offered paw. "Yes, I am Moselyn Pinette. Blossom? Please pardon my confusion." She paused briefly. "You seem awful small."

Blossom gigglechittered. "Not for a cousin squirrel. I'm nearly full grown, just as I assume you are as a 'biggen' squirrel."

“Cousin squirrel?” Moselyn fell silent for a moment. “Wait. Didn’t Parliament just grant rights and privileges to cousin squirrels just this past spring? And most cousins can’t speak our language.”

Blossom nodded. “Yes, and yes. I was lucky in that I got Dad’s speaking gene. Otherwise, I’d have to type away on my flatpanel, like Mom, and let it speak for me.”

Moselyn stared at Blossom a moment. “You’re the Ambassador’s daughter?”

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once. “I am. But I worked hard to get into this school a semester early. Schoolmaster Pekan reassured me it had nothing to do with who my father is. I got in on my own merits.”

Moselyn sat down and slowly shook her head. “I had hoped to have an interesting roommate. You called me a biggen. What does that mean?”

Blossom gigglechattered as she leapt up onto the other cushion, sat and looked up at Moselyn. “It’s the term my people use for citizen species because you are all bigger than us. And I hope I fulfill those hopes, Moselyn, preferable on my own and not due to who my parents are. And, yes, I find my boyfriend, Saniel, quite handsome.”

“Oh, yes, I can see why you’d look at us that way.”

The two spent the next klick¹ learning about each other and their families.

TWO

Moselyn set their meal trays down on a table and sat to eat. Blossom found she couldn’t go far trying to balance on two paws, so Moselyn took Blossom’s tray up with hers. Blossom thanked her as she double-up sitting cushions to reach the table so she could be at near the same level as her roommate without forcing her to lower the table to Blossom’s level. Saniel and a skunk soon joined them. Saniel introduced the skunk as his roommate, Drexle. As they ate, they made small talk. Throughout, Moselyn kept glancing towards Saniel, who didn’t seem to notice.

The room suddenly fell silent. All looked up to see Schoolmaster Pekan standing at the front of the cafeteria. “Welcome all!” he called out. “Both returning and new students. Would the new students please stand-up a moment and be recognized.”

All at Blossom’s table stood. She perched on her cushions to be able to be seen. Others stood up here and there around the room. The returning students clapped their hands briefly and shouted out greetings. Then the noise quickly faded away as suddenly, or so it seemed to Blossom,

¹ Klick-hour

everyone was looking toward her and pointing. Blossom looked about and fought down the instinct to hide from the sudden attention of so many others, including multiple predators. Her tail wigwagged a little bit. Saniel leaned over and whispered encouragement.

“Yes, you are not seeing things,” Pekan continued. “Among our new students is our first cousin squirrel, Blossom. I expect you to treat her with the same respect as any other student. Enjoy your meal and I hope you settle in smoothly. Classes begin in two days, as you are aware.” Pekan bowed and left the cafeteria.

The background din of chatter quickly returned, but to Blossom’s dismay, other students began to crowd around her asking questions. Saniel tried to block them, but there were too many. Blossom chattered loudly and the room fell silent as all stared at her again. Her tail wigwagged rapidly. “Please, please don’t crowd me. It’s difficult to fight the instincts. Give me a little space and I’ll give you my tale. If you continue to crowd me, I’ll need to flee.”

Saniel leaned over. “Are you alright?”

She flicked her tail up and down once. “I will be. I need to do this.”

She perched on her doubled-up cushions and gave a brief history about herself and The Refuge and how she got into Senior School and her dream of becoming a doctor. She explained how she might need to sniff them in order to fight the fear instinct. When she finished, the others applauded her. Some in the crowd called out encouragement. Other students slowly approached and waited for her to allow them to come up to her and be sniffed, each giving her a personal welcome and introducing themselves.

More than a klick passed before she could retreat to her room. Blossom felt exhausted, both physically and mentally. Moselyn was quiet. Blossom turned to her.

“I saw how you were eyeing Saniel,” she said plainly.

“I’m sorry, Blossom. I’m feeling jealous. I find him so attractive.”

Blossom gigglechattered. “Yes, that’s one of the many reasons I started nesting with him mid-summer.”

“You’ve slept with him?” she asked incredulously.

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once. “Of course, sharing a drey is the cousin squirrel version of dating, Moselyn. And that’s all it is. We’ve slept together most nights since I first joined him in his drey mid-summer.”

Moselyn stared at Blossom a moment. “So, snuggle sleep only.”

Blossom nodded. “At the time, we started nesting together, we were both too young for anything more than that. And I’ll remain too young until late winter.”

Moselyn blushed through her fur. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t pry like that.”

Blossom gigglechittered. “Dad warned me that sex is a sensitive subject among ‘Biggens’. It’s a serious subject among my kind, Moselyn. To couple with someone is the equivalent of citizens getting married.”

Moselyn’s eyes shot wide. “I had no idea.”

“Saniel just turned twelve. I’ll be one come mid-winter. In many forests, cousin squirrels start a family at age one. Our colony encourages us to wait until we’re two. Obviously, I’m waiting.” Blossom paused a moment, looking at her roommate with a twinkle in her eye. “Of course, sometimes, we share our boy/girlfriend with others.”

“Really?” There was a bit of hope in Moselyn’s voice. “Why would you offer to do that?”

Blossom gigglechittered. “I might make you blush again answering that question. If Saniel and I become mates we’ll never be able to have children together. We had a long discussion about that with our parents before they’d agree to allow us to come here together. Saniel has already indicated he wouldn’t be upset if we bring another cousin into our group when the time comes to start a family.” She dooped her tail. “But that would leave him out of siring pups of his own.”

“Oh,” Moselyn replied, paused and then said it again more quickly, “Oh!” as she finally understood what Blossom meant. And, yes, again, she blushed through the fur.

Blossom moved over next to Moselyn and took her handpaws in her forepaws and pointed to her trimmed claws. “After what I’ve just explained, if you’re still hoping to win over my boyfriend and nest with us, you’re going to need to grow these out.”

“Grow-out my claws?”

Blossom nodded again while flicking her tail up and down once. “Yes, how else are you going to be able to climb trees and impress him?”

Moselyn stared at her. “I was never allowed to try climbing back home.”

Blossom drooped her tail again. “That’s awful. We’ll fix that here.”

Moselyn closed her eyes and was quiet for a moment. Eventually, she opened them, met Blossom’s eyes and asked, “Why are you offering to do this? Don’t you love him?”

“I love Sanial dearly.” She squeezed Moselyn’s handpaws briefly before releasing them. “My kind grows up much faster than citizens, Moselyn. The oldest known member of my species, Elder Teacher, will be twelve this winter. Father has told me that back on Terra it’s not unusual for a cousin squirrel to live into their late twenties, provided they don’t die fighting the enemy in the war.”

Moselyn shuddered at the thought of having to wage war on others.

Blossom continued, “His grandfather lived to about thirty-five before he left the colony to live out his last days in the wilderness. I’m willing to help you if you really want to try and win him over as there needs to be someone there for him when I’m gone as I know Sanial will outlive me.”

Moselyn was speechless at how frank Blossom was being with her.

Blossom gigglechittered. “You spoke earlier that you hoped I’d be an interesting roommate.” She yawned, covering her mouth briefly with her tail. “I need to curl-up and sleep soon. Don’t worry that you might wake me. I sleep soundly soon after closing my eyes. I’ve got a lot to do tomorrow, not just prepare for the start of classes.” She paused a moment, but Moselyn didn’t reply, so Blossom continued. “I hope to build a proper winter nest on the floor under my hammock. I’ve slept in hammocks before, but I really prefer the feel and scent of twigs and leaves, especially cedar. I also need to start gathering nuts and seeds from my ‘territory’ out there,” she pointed out the window with her tail. “And try to satisfy that portion of my instincts. And if tonight’s food choices are an example, I’ll need ’em.” She paused a moment again before continuing. “Look, I know I’ve bombarded you with a lot about my kind in such a short time. I apologize if I’ve overwhelmed you, Moselyn.”

Moselyn was silent a moment longer. “It’s alright, Blossom. You’ve just given me a lot to think about.”

Blossom nodded. She quickly hugged Moselyn, surprising her. She then ducked out of the room. She headed to the bathroom briefly before returning and curling-up on the hammock. As she promised, she was quickly asleep. Moselyn continued to look at her sleeping roommate for a short while. Yes, she was quickly becoming a very interesting roommate. Moselyn then turned to her flatpanel and watched an entertainment show. She’d call it a night several clicks later after sending a brief video message to her folks about her new roommate.

THREE

Blossom hung her backpack on a branch in a butternut tree in her territory and got to work filling it with butternuts. She then strapped it on and hauled it quickly to the hollow in an oak tree that she and her father had found back in the summer. She paused a moment as she could smell

another squirrel had been there. She cautiously poked her muzzle in the hollow to see that there were already more than two dozen or so assorted butternuts, acorns, and a few other nuts. Her tail twitched. She wiggled the backpack off, dropped it in the hollow and entered. She dumped out the contents and then thought she heard scrabbling outside. She quickly worked her way up the hollow above the entry hole and waited. Another squirrel poked its head in and released the acorn held in its jaw. It fell audibly onto the pile.

Blossom chattered at the other squirrel. “Why you in my territory!” She nipped at the back of its neck enough to pinch, but not enough to break the skin.

The other squirrel knocked its head on the top of the opening in startlement. It chittered in fear and scrabbled up the tree. Blossom gave chase. She quickly caught up with the other. She nipped at it again. “Stop!” She cried out. To her surprise, the other skidded on the branch and she nearly piled into it.

The other squirrel was shaking. “Truce?” (pleadflick) He asked in an unsteady voice.

Blossom recognized the male she and her father had met back in summer. “You! Why you invade my territory?”

The other gripped his tail in his forepaws and looked at her with pleading in his eyes. “I no mean invade. Try and help. Hope you choose me if I help though you no see first winter.” The branch under them sagged a moment as he finished explaining. His eyes shot wide a moment as it sagged too much to be another smart squirrel like them. He chattered nervously as he slowly turned and faced the newcomer. He let go of his tail as it began to whip back and forth. “Biggen!” He cried out as he tried to retreat and bumped into Blossom. “Biggen! We must flee!”

“Potential mate, should I chase this squirrel off?” Sanial asked.

The male squirrel looked between the biggen squirrel and Blossom. Blossom moved around him giving him an opening to flee if he chose. She nuzzled the biggen squirrel.

“No, Energy,” she chittered. “Leave him be. He our,” she switched to Biggenspeak for the next word, which the male did not understand. “neighbor. He ask for truce. I give. He one I speak about when I share stonefruit with you. He hope I choose him as potential mate.” She looked directly at the male. “As I speak before, your Elder forbid me to choose from squirrels in this forest. And I can no speak about home forest to you.”

He looked between her and ‘Energy’. “You choose a Biggen?”

She gigglechittered as she nuzzled Sanial again. “Remember, I both smart squirrel and small Biggen.”

“You can no make pups with Biggen.”

Blossom drooped her tail. “No, we can try when time comes, but no pups will take. Can no have pups here at Biggen learn place. Is forbidden.”

The male tilted his head quizzically.

“I can no explain further. Your Elder forbid.”

Saniel jumped in. “Elder no forbid me speak.”

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once. “That true.”

“Learning Biggen things take long time. Is like Elder teaching Elder things. No time to raise pups. Is why pups forbidden. You waste time energy try to win my potential mate. You risk anger of your Elder. He might chase you out of the forest. Harvest time bad time to be chased from forest. You freeze-starve.” Saniel drooped his tail.

“I risk chase out of forest to win Blossom,” his tail wigwagged nervously as he stood his full height on the branch. I would fight you, Biggen, for Blossom to win her.”

Saniel gigglechittered as he glanced between him and Blossom and back. “You very brave. I will no fight you unless you bite first. My Elders forbid fight between squirrels.” He narrowed his eyes. “You would lose. I no wish harm you.”

Blossom wigwagged her tail and warning chattered. “No fight. You fight, truce end. Energy right. You would lose. Energy hunt fox save my littermate. He hold fox neck in his jaw. If he bite down hard, fox die. I ask he let fox live when littermate safe up tree. He no kill fox. He let fox go.”

The male’s eyes grew wide for a moment and he looked again at Saniel. He was a Biggen, but he didn’t look large enough to hunt a fox.

Saniel moved over to trunk of the tree and stretched-up his full body-length. The male began to chitter fearfully as the Biggen seemed to nearly double in size as he stretched out his hind legs and stood there a moment just on those legs. He sat back down. The male fought the urge to flee. He refused to do that in front of Blossom. He really wanted to win her, though he could see it was hopeless. He bowed his head and closed his eyes and sighchittered. He was startled when he was nudged gently. To his shock, it was the biggen Blossom called Energy.

“Again, you very brave.” He glanced at Blossom and then back at him. “I know in most forests squirrels no take name.”

The male flicked his tail up and down once. He didn’t feel brave. He was simply too afraid to flee. He knew he’d lost. How could he prove he was a better male against one who could hunt a fox?

“There are too many Biggens to just say this one or that one. Is why we take names.” Energy looked at the male. “And we give names to others. I will call you, Brave.”

“Brave,” Blossom repeated. “I like that. It fits you.”

The male looked about nervously. “No tell Elder I take name. I no that brave.”

“You brave enough to say you fight me for Blossom,” Energy replied. He glanced at Blossom who flicked her tail up and down once. “And you no flee when I show you how big I am. As Blossom speak, your Elder forbid she speak of our ways. That no apply to me. In our home forest is always truce. We share whole forest and help each other.” Again, he glanced at Blossom who again flicked her tail up and down once. “We grant you complete truce. You visit our territory as you wish. We no chase you off.” Energy glanced about. “Make sure Elder no watch when you come visit. We no want Elder grow angry. Go, is harvest time. You should prepare for long, cold winter.”

Brave flicked his tail up and down once. “I leave now.”

Blossom bounded up to Brave and hugged him briefly, catching him off guard. “Goodbye, Brave. We need work on winter nest in Biggen learning place.”

Brave was beside himself as he scampered back towards his own territory. Maybe he hadn’t completely lost yet.

After Brave departed, Saniel turned to Blossom. “Even after I stood my full height, he didn’t flee. He really wants you.” He gogglechittered briefly.

Blossom nodded as she scampered over next to him. “I think he’s cute, Saniel, but I don’t want to lead him on. It would be different if we were wrapping up our studies instead of just starting. Then, I wouldn’t give two wigwags of my tail what the local Elder orders. We could just bring Brave to The Refuge. Males outnumber females in this forest if Brave it to be believed.”

Saniel was caught off guard. “You’d choose him after such a brief encounter?”

Blossom took his hands in her forepaws and nuzzled him. “You’re the one who told our parents you’d welcome another smart squirrel into our group so I could have pups. Obviously, I’d want your consensus before doing so as you would be first mate. Come, let me show you something.” She led him to the hollow in an oak tree. “Look inside.”

He did so. “You’ve been busy.”

“No, Brave has been,” she retrieved her backpack. “As my mother taught us as pups, this is one of the ways a male will try to win a female in a neighboring territory or at least that was the way before The Refuge was formed. The male will gather food for the female they are trying to win to show they can provide for them and for pups” (drooptail) “Yes, Brave wants to win me badly.” She sighchittered before continuing. “And I can’t let him for now, even if you agreed and

it's way too soon for that. He needs to concentrate on harvesting for himself. I hope he does so from here on. I'm sure the winters are just as long and cold here in Rock City as back home."

Saniel took the hint and spent the next klick helping her gather nuts. They filled a few different hollows and brought a few backpacks worth of nuts into her room. Moselyn wasn't about. He then helped her work on her/their winter nest. It was just after midday when she suggested he take a break. She could finish the nest from there, thanking him with a little nuzzling.

FOUR

"It's about time!" Cloud exclaimed as a hovercraft arrived in front of him. He'd been in a queue for one for over a klick. Apparently, there was a high demand for them that day in this remote part of the Lakes and Forest District. Behind him several squirrels waited with a large stack of sacks filled with butternuts. The hovercraft settled to the forest floor and the door opened. Inside there was squeaking.

Cloud held up his tail to signal that the others should wait. They set down the sacks they had just started to pick up to form a chain to fill the hovercraft and waited. He peered in to see several cages, most filled with small rodents. His tail twitched nervously back and forth. Something wasn't right here. He cautiously stepped into it and over to the control panel. He called up the vehicle's travel log as his tail continued to twitch. After reviewing it, he peaked back out at the others. "Wait here. I return soon," he called out in chitterspeak. He punched in the command for the hovercraft to return to its last destination.

"Wait!" Several of the others called to no avail as the door closed as it rose and shot off deep into the territory of The Refuge. Two of the squirrels darted off to alert the first Elder they could find.

In twenty ceklicks² it covered a distance that would have taken Cloud most of the day to travel climbing tree-to-tree on the far side of the territory of The Refuge, out past the furthest orchard and where his father had killed the owl the previous winter. The hovercraft slowed down and settled to the ground.

A citizen male weasel, roughly the same size as Elder Jessophat, watched the hovercraft return and settle on the forest floor in front of him. He looked non-plussed as the door opened and a white cousin squirrel stood in the doorway looking back at him.

"Mr. Choran, right?" the cousin squirrel asked in Common. "Loose something?" the squirrel curled his tail up behind his back briefly. There was a hint of amusement in the tone of his voice.

² Ceclick-minute

The weasel nodded. “Yes, I was releasing small rodents as permitted by your Elders when the hovercraft suddenly came on by itself and flew off.” He tapped his flatpanel, “And before I could grab my flatpanel to stop it, it was beyond the range.” He sighed, “and I’m too far out for the flatpanel to pick-up the network without the booster in the hovercraft. I wasn’t looking forward to the long walk back. Thank you...” he paused.

“Cloud Busheytail,” Cloud bowed. “Come on, let’s get the rest of these small rodents to wherever you planned to release’em and then I need a favor in return.”

Choran tilted his head slightly. “You’re one of the ambassador’s kids, right?”

Cloud nodded. “And I got his voice gene enabling me to speak directly to you, Mr. Choran. I’ve been in a wait queue for over a klick for this hovercraft. If I simply turn it back to you, I’ll go to the end of that queue again. So, you’re stuck with me for the moment. I’ll assist you with releasing the rest of your rodents. In return, I’ve got a load of butternuts waiting to be hauled to the village processing plant. I want your help with that, after which you can be on your way.”

Choran nodded and bordered the craft. He started to reach for a cage of small rodents, and then quickly twisted, leaping at Cloud, catching the young squirrel off guard. Choran stood-up with the white squirrel grasped by the scruff of the neck. Cloud cried out, chittering as his tail wigwagged back and forth. He tried to struggle, but the weasel’s grasp was firm. His flatpanel lay on the floor of the hovercraft as he had dropped it as the weasel pounced on him. He continued to chitter fearfully.

Choran carried Cloud back out of the hovercraft and turned him around to look at Cloud. “That was easier than I expected. Programing the hovercraft to act like it left me by accident worked quite well. I eat way too much small rodent. I was thinking it’s time to vary my diet a little with some young squirrel.” He smiled, showing his sharp teeth to the young squirrel.

Cloud chitter squealed louder than before as his tail whipped about faster. He lost control of his bowels. And as suddenly as he had panicked, a calm fell over him as he bowed his head and remembered the warning his parents and the other Elders had given him and all the others about never approaching Biggens who were not members of The Refuge alone. He shed a few tears and then looked up at his captor. “Please make it quick.” He then closed his eyes and waited for the end.

Choran raised an eyebrow at the squirrel’s last request and carried Cloud back into the hovercraft. He opened a cage and gently tossed the squirrel in, slamming it shut before Cloud could react. Cloud heard the door lock.

Choran’s voice was slightly muffled through the cage walls. “When the time comes, if you don’t struggle, I promise it will be quick. I prefer my meat cooked. I can’t do that out here. You’ll be coming back to my home. I’ve got several cages of small rodents to release first.”

Cloud pounded at the door. It wouldn’t budge from the inside. There was nothing to grasp. He was trapped. The cage was barely big enough for him to crawl pace one body length and back.

The material was smooth with tiny holes for air circulation. It reeked of small rodent feces and urine. Seeing no way out, he curled up and whimpered, eventually falling asleep.

Cloud was jostled awake as the cage was moved about. There was a thud as it was set down a little harder than necessary. He cowered at the far back of the cage as the door opened. He stared for a moment in disbelief.

“Mom?!?” he stammered.

Pinecone had a stern look to her muzzle as she chided him in chitterspeak. “Elders warn you no approach any Biggen alone who is no member of The Refuge.” She chittergrowled briefly. “You lucky this Biggen weasel is good and no bad Biggen. Come out. If you must, flee up tree and scree your heart out. Once you calm down, come back here. We will speak this more after.” Her tail thrashed about showing her anger.

Cloud cautiously poked his head out to see both his parents standing there and other members of the Council of Elders in the lower branches of nearby trees. There were other squirrels further up watching him. Choran stood to one side.

“I’m sorry to scare you like this, Master Cloud. I had orders from your Elder Council to do so if a squirrel approached me alone.”

Cloud drooped his tail knowing he was in trouble and he was being made an example in front of others. However, the fear was too much. He quickly fled up the nearest tree screeching in terror. His cry was taken-up by others nearby. The tails of the Elders wigwagged, but they resisted the cry to flee. The weasel stared up towards where Cloud was for a moment and then glanced back at Pinecone and the other Elders.

“It’ll be a good 25 to 30 ceclicks before he calms down enough to come back down,” Pinecone typed into her flatpanel and it spoke for her.

“I really hated doing that, Elder Pinecone,” the weasel said as he picked-up the empty cage.

Pinecone’s flatpanel spoke as she typed, “I know. Thank you again for your assistance, Choran. You will be paid for your special service today.”

“No,” he replied. “I didn’t enjoy today’s task and hope to never need to do it again. Being able to release small rodents in your forest has been payment enough. Today was also the last batch of small rodents I’ll be releasing here until spring. The reason being that they need time to establish a territory and gather food for the winter. It would be cruel to bring any more here after today. It’s nearly too late in the season now. Any more released wouldn’t have the time needed to survive.”

Pinecone nodded and typed. “Because they would freeze-starve.”

“Correct.”

“Very well. You’ll be welcome to bring more in the spring if you wish. May you have a safe journey home.” She and the others bowed to him.

FIVE

Saniel didn’t spend long in his room as Drexle wasn’t there, which he was thankful for as he didn’t want to spend a lot of time talking to the skunk at the moment. There was someone else he felt he needed to talk to. He grabbed his backpack and headed back outside. He looked about and slipped into the forest a little way away from the far end of the school as he didn’t want Blossom to see him, whether she was outside or looking out of her room. He then worked his way back to the portion of Blossom’s territory where they had encountered Brave. From there, he climbed through the tree canopy until the school was barely out of site. He chose an oak laden with acorns and moved further up into the canopy. He wiggled off the pack, hung it on a branch and began harvesting acorns placing them in the pack. He made sure he was noisy as he did so. It got the desired effect he wanted.

“Chit! Chatter! Invader! My territory! Lea...” Brave trailed off mid-word as he skidded to a halt on the branch directly in front of Saniel. He chittered nervously as he faced the Biggen squirrel.

Saniel continued to harvest acorns, placing them in the now half-filled knapsack, but he did so quietly. “Hello Brave,” he chittered as he continued while wigwagging his tail in greeting. “We have a small problem. Your Elder give Blossom all forest in site of Biggen learning place.” Saniel leaned out a bit on a branch a little too small for his weight and it sagged down a bit. He pointed with his tail through the resulting opening. One could barely see the top of the school through the opening. He glanced back at Brave as he placed another acorn in the pack, not slowing down. “Why would your Elder give your territory to another squirrel, one who is small biggen? Have you done something that he chose to punish you for by taking your territory from you?” Saniel briefly raised his tail in a curl.

Brave stared at the top of the building through the opening in the canopy. Saniel moved back to a more solid part of the branch and closed the backpack. He wiggled it on.

Brave chattered angrily. “Those my acorns! I will bite you, Energy! Biggen or no Biggen!”

“Yes, these are yours. Show me were to take them.”

Brave stared at Saniel. “What you mean?”

“Blossom is worried. She fear you will freeze-starve if you continue to try and gather nuts for her rather than work on gathering for yourself. How long did it take to bring what you did to her hollow? Maybe a pawspan³ of time?”

Brave flicked his tail up and down once and lowered his head a moment as he felt shame for some reason. Why was this Biggen here to rub it into his fur that Blossom had chosen him despite how hard Brave had worked?

“And it was about the same amount of nuts as I’ve just spent a finger-claw time gathering into my backpack here, right?” He pointed to the pack with his tail. “It is harvest time, Brave. And winter comes fast here. Let me help you a little. I can give you two,” he held up two claws, “pawspans of time.”

“Why?”

“I angry with your Elder. How he treat Blossom and you. Putting you in the same territory. Is no right, Brave. I know he no like Biggens. I see he test Blossom. Why he angry with you? Why else he give your territory or part of it to Blossom? We need to speak and I can harvest nuts and speak at same time. Same you?”

Brave flicked his tail up and down once and then it drooped. “Come I show you where place acorns. Speak on way.” Saniel followed him. “Elder is sire of dame,” he stated as they made their way deeper into his territory and towards a large oak tree. He looked about briefly and showed Saniel a hollow on the far side.

Saniel wiggled off his pack and dumped the contents through the opening.

Brave lowered his voice to nearly a whisper. “I no know why he mad at me now. Maybe still mad after I lead other elder to him early last winter. He come with,” he held up two claws, “other squirrels.” He held up one claw, “who I now know is sire of Blossom. Is mean he give part my territory to Blossom. I abide by rule of Elder though is no fair. She...” he hesitated a moment.

“is kind, caring, beautiful, and female.” Saniel propped quietly.

Brave flicked his tail up and down once and sighchittered. “And she choose a Biggen as her potential mate.”

“I no expect her to choose me, Brave. I am a Biggen. My family live more like big smart squirrels than biggens. I can no give her pups. But she chose me anyway. Come, we harvest more nuts. No time to just sit and speak. Can speak and harvest at same time.”

He let Brave lead the way to whichever tree he wanted them to harvest next. It turned out to be the same oak Saniel had started in. He wiggled the backpack off again, hooked it on a branch and opened it. Brave gazed inside it.

³ Pawspan-about one hour/klick

“This useful Biggen tool. It take me more than handspan time to bring that many acorns to nearest hollow. This so big I fit in it.” He gathered acorns with Saniel.

“I could get you a smaller one that fit you, Brave,” Saniel offered.

Brave drooped his tale and then wigwagged it left to right and back once. “No, that would make Elder very angry. He no like Biggen things.”

Saniel shrugged. “Very well,” he tossed acorns into the pack at a rapid rate. “Blossom does like you, Brave. Is why she grant you truce. Well, truce through me because of your Elder. But she can no choose you, at least not right now.”

Brave stared at him, pausing in harvesting acorns.

“What you mean?”

“She is forbidden by your Elder to speak of our forest. Is why I speak about it this morning as your Elder no forbid me. Well, no forbid me yet. As I speak, things are different there. Smart squirrels, small biggens and biggens all live together always in truce like in winter storm.” The backpack being full again, Saniel closed the top and wiggled it on. This time, he led Brave back to the hollow. “We all work together, make colony stronger. We take in smart squirrels and others who have no other home or chose to come there on own.” He emptied the pack again and started back towards the other oak.

“My dame and sire and Blossom’s no wanted us to be potential mates at first. They scared for us.”

“Because you Biggen and she no Biggen.”

Saniel flicked his tail up and down once as he wiggled off the backpack again.

“Biggens know many things. But no know if Biggen and smart squirrel can make pups. What if pups take? Would they be Biggens? Smart squirrels? What would happen to Blossom if they Biggen? Biggen pups this big,” Saniel held his paws apart nearly half Brave’s body length, “when born. Biggen pups take two seasons to grow in female once they take.”

Brave eyes widened as he chittered and wigwagged his tail in distress. “Blossom no live to birth pups that big!” he blurted out.

Saniel wigwagged his tail left to right and back and then it drooped. “No, she would no live. Is why our dames and sires scared that we potential mates.”

“You will no couple when she see next winter?”

Saniel gigglechittered. “That will be up to her. This winter she turns one.” He held up a single claw. “This will be my ten and three,” he held up all ten claws and then three more” winter.” He continued to harvest acorns the entire time they spoke.

Brave’s eyes shot wide. “You older than Elder!”

“Biggens take longer to grow and live longer than smart squirrels. I still pup, Brave. Seeing ten and two,” he held-up ten and then two claws, “winters is like you seeing one. I will be pup until I see three more winters after this one.”

“You just speak you can no sire pups with Blossom. Too dangerous. Would you still let her lead you on chase?”

“If she chose lead my on chase, I would chase. It would be safe right now. We can no have pups while at Biggen learning place. Biggen healer give us...” Saniel paused. “I know no how to describe it. Chitterspeak have less words than Biggenspeak. Special herbs, poke in arm like wasp sting. Special herbs keeps pups from taking if we couple. Once she turns one, it would be safe for her to lead me on chase. If we couple, no pups take. But we would then be mates per smart squirrel rules. Is a little different among Biggens.”

“Can no have pups while learn Biggen things?”

Saniel wiggled the pack on again and flicked his tail up and down once. “I speak on it briefly this morning. How long it take your Elder teach elder things to other squirrel?”

“I ask sire of dame that when I was pup. He speak it take many winters.”

“And if that squirrel has pups?”

Brave’s eyes widened in understanding. “No time learn. Must tend to pups.”

Saniel flicked his tail up and down once as he turned to make his way back to the hollow. Brave leapt in front of Saniel barring his way. “We go different hollow this time. I like layer acorns and butternuts in my stash.”

Saniel followed him and emptied his backpack again. He let Brave lead him to a butternut tree near the original oak and the harvest continued.

“Brave, as I speak before, our colony is different. We have two females, littermates who come from different forest. One with more females than males. They catch eye of two males. Both liked both males. Rather than force one to choose one over other, they agree, all four, to become mates. Our Elders quickly rule can share mates.”

“Why you speak this?”

“I agreed that when time comes, we will find another smart squirrel so Blossom can grow pups as I must no sire pups with her. Is why our dames and sires allow us to be potential mates.” He saw Brave look at him. “But, it will be three to four,” he held-up three and then four claws, “winters before that can happen. It take long time to learn Biggen things at Biggen learning place.”

“Is long time to wait,” Brave replied as he drooped his tail.

Saniel flicked his tail up and down once as he harvested butternuts. “Blossom likes you, Brave. You harvest nuts for her. You no back down when I show you how big I really am. If no find other female in that time, you are patient, are willing to wait that long time, remain a good friend to us in that time, and are willing to leave this forest and join our colony, I will share Blossom with you. That’s a lot, I kno..oooffff!”

Saniel was cut off mid-word as he nearly lost his footing as Brave barreled him over in a bearhug or at least the best the smaller squirrel could attempt with Saniel. Brave nuzzled him in his excitement. He would have to wait, but waiting would be worth it. He would have the wonderful Blossom, though he’d have to share her.

The rest of the time flew by quickly as Saniel explained about The Refuge to Brave as they continued to harvest acorns and butternuts. At the end of the second handspan of time Brave stared in disbelief at the filled hollow. They had filled both the hollows he had shown to Saniel and part of a third. What they had gathered in two handspans using the Biggen tool called a backpack would have taken him many days. It was a very useful time-saving tool. He no understand why Elder forbid it.

Brave offered to hug Saniel again. The larger squirrel embraced him. “I can no thank you enough. I like this truce.”

“It is what we do in our colony, Brave. We help each other. And as I speak at the start, Blossom was worried about you after seeing what you did for her. She knows winters are long here. She and I start learn Biggen things tomorrow. We will no be free to harvest more nuts for the next five” Saniel held-up five fingers, “days.”

Brave wigwagged his tail in concern. “How you hope to gather enough food for winter even with backpack if no time while you learn Biggen things?”

Saniel gigglechittered. “Biggen teaching Elders care for us. We are still pups. There is enough food for us. There are several ten tens Biggen pups here to learn.” He held up all ten fingers ten times.

Brave whistled at the thought of so many Biggens in one place, but the learning place was very big.

“Food is provided so we can spend all time learning. So, you no try gather any more nuts for Blossom. Just for you. We no starve in Biggen learning place. What we gather is extra just in case.”

SIX

“Where have you been?” Blossom asked him just as he returned to his room. She looked him up and down. “I smell Brave on you. You didn’t hurt him, did you?” Her tail wigwagged back and forth in agitation.

“What? No! I helped him gather nuts for the past two hours,” Saniel replied, shaking the backpack off his back, pulling a single butternut out, and offering it to her. “He insisted I take one back to give to you.”

“You helped him?”

Saniel looked down briefly and scuffed a footpaw. “Well, I wanted to talk to him and it is harvest time. I didn’t want to take away from that, so I helped him gather butternuts and acorns for the winter. I told him about The Refuge and how it came to be. How things are different there. What he’d be getting himself into should he be willing to wait and succeed at getting you to chose him as second mate. Thing...Ooofff!”

She pounced him, giving him a similar bearhug to the one Brave had given him. The butternut was knocked out of his handpaw and rolled a little way on the floor. “I knew I chose correctly when I had asked to share your drey this summer. You are not selfish,” she paused, “even if you can be a bit overprotective at times.”

Saniel drooped his tail. “I’m sorry, Butternut. It’s hard to not be protective.”

“Is The Refuge all you talked about and what he can expect?”

Saniel wigwagged his tail left to right and back again. “No, I was wondering if he knew why his Elder may be upset with him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, probably a third, if not nearly half the territory you were given was part of his territory.”

“WHAT!?!” Again, her tail wigwagged in irritation.

“He is the grandson of this forest’s Elder. He led your parents and Elder Teacher to the Elder last winter. This had been one of the last forests they visited before returning to what is now The Refuge.”

“And this Elder doesn’t like Biggens.” Blossom drooped her tail. “And you told him all about The Refuge. If his grandfather learns, he might be chased out of the forest for trusting a Biggen. We’ll have to help him move to The Refuge if that happens.”

“This forest’s elder would do that to his own grandpup during this time of year?” Saniel asked in disbelief.

“I only met this Elder once, Saniel, and I wouldn’t put it past him. He’s mean. I think he only talked to Father and I because we brought a backpack of butternuts to him. When I interrupted him one time, I think he would have bit me if Father wasn’t right there.”

She picked up the butternut that Saniel had dropped and audibly cracked it with her teeth and nibbled on the sweat buttery nut within. She bit off a chunk and offered it to Saniel, who accepted it.

“You don’t know how much I wish I could do that with my teeth,” he said before eating the piece she had offered him. She quickly finished the rest. She gathered the shell fragments to toss outdoors later.

“I know,” she replied. “Anyway, we can worry about Brave later. For now, we have a dinner date.”

“What?”

“We leave in 50 ceclicks. You, me, Moselyn, Drexle, and maybe one other. Drexle wasn’t sure if the other student could join us on short notice. We’re going to Jochen’s Restaurant, which is just a short scamper away.”

“Jochen’s....Jochen’s...why does that sound vaguely familiar?”

“He is a partner with Father. He makes Teran pizza.”

“Teran pizza?! I’m in. Aldin made that for us once last winter and I loved it. I guess I have just enough time to freshen up, huh?”

Blossom picked a twig out of his fur. “Or at least get the worst of the twigs out.” She gigglechattered as she licked him lightly on the nose tip.

Jochen's was very busy, but there was a table ready for their group of five, two citizen squirrels, one cousin squirrel, and two citizen skunks. The other skunk was Drexle's girlfriend, Hersah, he had met in primary school that was shared between his and her villages. A spotted skunk, she was a year ahead of him at the school and very excited to meet the others, especially Blossom.

Jochen arrived at their table and presented flatpanel menus. "Well, Ms. Busheytail, you're back again, and brought friends, I see."

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once. "Yes, Mr. Jochen. I invited them to try some Terran pizza." She looked at the others. "Are you willing to trust me in the choice?"

"Sure, I'm game," Drexle responded.

"I know it'll be great," Sanial replied. "The Ambassador made me some once."

"I've been here and have had it before. I can't wait," Hersah replied.

Moselyn hesitated. "I don't want to sound impolite or stupid. But what is it?"

Jochen pointed to the next table over that was just being served. "I'm not sure how to describe it to those who haven't had it." Some at the table waved to Hersah, recognizing her as they were returning students like her. Hersah waived back as Moselyn observed the others dig in.

"Alright, sure, I'll give it a try."

Jochen turned again to Blossom. "So, what will it be?"

"Surprise us, Mr. Jochen, and bring a big pot of herbal tea." She looked again at the others. "Do any of you want something else to drink other than tea?"

All agreed tea would be fine.

Jochen collected the flatpanels and quickly returned with a tray carrying a pot of tea and five mugs, one smaller than the others. He poured tea for each of them and let them be. They made small talk for a while. Quicker than expected, a waiter set a giant 30 cemit⁴ steaming hot pizza on the center of their table. There were round vegetable protein sausage pieces on it along with mushrooms. It smelled wonderful as all their noses began to twitch. Blossom and Hersah showed the others how to serve themselves and warned them to let it cool. They didn't need the warning based on the steam that wafted from their slices. While the slices cooled, the waiter returned with a large bowl of salad and five smaller bowls. The salad was divided up and enjoyed while they waited for the pizza to cool.

Sanial bit into his slice and his eyes widened as he chewed. "This is probably better than the one the Ambassador made last winter!"

⁴ Cemit-centimeter. 30 cemits is roughly 12 inches.

“I heard that,” Jochen called from across the way. “Thank you.”

Drexle’s eyes also lit-up as he bit into his slice. Rather than comment, he continued eating his slice quickly.

Moselyn sniffed at hers and took a little nibble. Her eyes widened as she took a bigger bite. Once she swallowed, she said, “I don’t know why I was so hesitant. This is excellent!”

The pizza had been sliced into ten slices, which prevented any debate about who would get the last slice as all were able to have two. Two of the slices were smaller than the others, which Blossom assumed were hers.

When they were finished, Jochen presented them the bill on a flatpanel. Blossom stared at the amount and turned to him. “Mr. Jochen, this isn’t correct. There’s no charge for the pizza here. Just the salad and tea.”

“I know you and the others have a tight budget, most likely small allowances from your parents. And your father is my partner, Ms. Blossom.”

Blossom looked at the others briefly while wigwagging her tail in agitation. “I don’t care if he’s your partner. It’s not fair to you.”

Jochen leaned into their table and spoke in a lower voice so as to not be overheard at the other nearby tables. “You asked me to surprise you. My cook crew messed up a pizza order for another table. They used a butternut crust when they were supposed to use a wheat crust. It was already a business write-off. If you had not said to surprise you, that pizza would have gone to waste. Next time, I promise you there will be no discount. Please accept it this time.”

“Very well, Mr. Jochen and thank you.” Blossom replied, placing her palm on the flatpanel. It flashed from purple to green.

“Hey!” Drexle protested. “Shouldn’t we split the bill?”

“Next time. I’m the one who invited all of you, so my treat. And it’s not that much really with the pizza being free.”

SEVEN

The hovercraft came to a halt and drifted to the forest floor. The citizen tasseled ear, gray squirrel within saw there were several cousin squirrels, two citizen squirrels, and a citizen raccoon waiting for her. She stepped out with her one bag.

“Welcome, Mentor Hidget,” one of the cousin squirrels, female by her voice, spoke in perfect Common. “It is one thing to see each other on a flatpanel. It is very different in person, I’m sure. I’m Butternut.” She pointed to the others in turn introducing them, ending with the raccoon, her husband. Hidget remembered what she had read about her.

Some of the other cousin squirrels chittered greeting. Butternut quickly translated for them. One had nearly orange fur who kept bowing to her. “Thank you, thank you,” Butternut translated. Hidget waved it off.

“My chitterspeak is good,” she replied. “I understand Elder..Foxy, correct?” Hidget raised her tail in a curve over her back briefly.

The orangish-red furred squirrel wigwagged her tail up and down once.

“Where is class nest?” Hidget asked in chitterspeak.

“I will show you where the classroom is,” Butternut responded in Common.

“But first,” Carulin jumped in, “you need to learn to climb. My husband can take your bag.”

“Here, right off? Now?” Hidget asked nervously as Jochen accepted her bag. He quickly scaled the tree with it, vanishing in the canopy.

Carulin nodded. “The classroom is roughly 15 mits⁵ above the ground. There is an interior stair, but climbing will be easier for you once you gain confidence in doing it. Jessophat taught me long ago. So, I know what it’s like to feel scared about it. The first thing I want you to do is raise your left foot.”

Hidget did so.

“Now rotate your ankle to your left as far around as you can.” Carulin raised her own left foot and rotated her foot around until it pointed behind her.

Hidget gasped in surprise. However, she did as she was told and gasped again as she could do the same. It felt a bit tight, but she was able to do it. Carulin gigglechittered like a cousin squirrel.

“You never tried to do that before, I take it?”

“Maybe when I was a small pup and I got scolded for it. I’ve never needed to do it since and didn’t know if I could do it.”

Carulin nodded. “I want you to rotate it around a few times. Then do the same thing with your other foot. As you have never climbed before, you need to make sure the muscles that let you rotate your feet like that aren’t too tight from lack of use.”

⁵ Mit-meter, about 3 feet

Hidget rotated her other foot. She was amazed she could do it.

“Excellent. Now then, the only way to learn to climb is to climb.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry, we’re not going too high, just twice your height.”

“Okay,” she replied with hesitation.

Carulin led her up the tree roughly one-and-a-half mits above the ground. She paused and waited for Hidget to get up next to her.

“That’s a little hard on the claws,” she admitted.

“Your fingers and toes will toughen with time. Within a week or two, you won’t notice it.”

“Really? Alright, now what?”

Carulin turned around on the trunk and faced downward. She pointed to her rear feet with her tail. She had rotated them around. While she faced down, her feet were facing up. “Do like me.”

Hidget nervously wigwagged her tail. She worked her way around until she was facing downward like her. She could feel most of her weight was on her rear claws.

“Wow,” she uttered. “I did it.”

Carulin then let go of the trunk with her handpaws and dangled from her rear claws. She tapped Hidget gently with one of her fingers.

“What!? You’re crazy!”

Carulin shook her head in the negative. “No, you need to trust your claws. As long as they’re fully grown out, they will support you.”

Hidget closed her eyes took a deep breath and slowly let go of the trunk with her hands. They snapped open as she realized she hadn’t fallen.

“See. Now, we’ll get down. Grab the trunk again with your front paws.”

Hidget did so.

“Hold tight with your hands and do a little scrabble hop with your feet. Have your feet grasp the trunk again.” Carulin demonstrated. “Then you loosen your hand grip. Slide them down, and

repeat. If that's too hard, you can also move one footpaw and the opposite handpaw down at the same time." She worked her way down the trunk using both methods and looked up at Hidget.

Hidget gulped hard. She gripped the trunk extra hard with her hands and scooted her feet down. She then scooted her hands down. Then her feet. Near the bottom, she lost her grip while scooting her feet down, tumbled, squealing in fear. She rolled and landed in a heap.

"That was a good first try. We'll keep practicing like this later, going a little higher each time. And that's all there is to climbing. Within a few days, you'll get the hang of it. Then, once there's a good layer of snow on the ground, we'll work on jumps."

Hidget wigwagged her tail nervously. "Jumps?"

"Well, there are some levels in the canopy where the branches of one tree intersect another, but most of the time, your option is jump or climb down from one tree, walk along the ground to the tree you need to get to and climb back up. Jumping is quicker and reduces the amount of climbing you need to do."

"And we'll wait until there's snow on the ground because?"

"You're going to miss on some of your tries at first. It's better to land in snow than crash into hard ground."

In her head, Hidget briefly questioned her choice to come here.

Through this, Butternut had patiently waited and now spoke up. "I'll show you the classroom and your room now."

Hidget snapped out of her thoughts. "Huh? Oh, sorry. Yes, please show me, Butternut."

Butternut led her along the ground for some distance.

"This would be faster through the treetops, but I understand you're not ready for that."

Hidget looked around as Butternut led her on. She didn't remember a time when she had seen trees as large as these. Many were a good 15 to 18 mits in diameter. Butternut paused at the base of one of these, a huge butternut tree that was at least 18 mits in diameter at the base. She pointed up with her tail. Hidget audibly gulped.

"I did warn you in the video conference as did Carulin just prior to your climbing lesson."

"I...I know, but seeing it in the fur is so different from a camera angle. Will I need to climb?"

Butternut giggled as she opened a door in the side of the tree that blended in perfectly with the rest of the trunk. "Your choice. You can test your climbing skills or take the stairs put in for my husband."

“I think I’ll take the stairs.”

“Suit yourself. I’ll see you up top in a little bit.” Butternut nimbly scrambled up the trunk.

Hidget watched her for a moment and then entered through the doorway. She found the stairs and started climbing. They wound in a circle inside the trunk. She was amazed and wondered what engineering firm had built this. After the first 2 mits in height, there was a landing and a door on the interior side of the stairs. It had a sign that listed it as storage. She circled around the next set of stairs climbing ever upward. Every rotation was roughly another 2 mits in height change with a landing and another door on the interior, again marked as storage. This continued on for what seemed like forever, until she reached a landing with a door marked restroom. On her next rotation up, she found not a door, but an opening to the interior of the tree. As before another set of stairs continued up. She heard footsteps above her and looked up to see Butternut bounding down from above.

“Good, you climbed that quicker than I expected. Come.” Butternut led her through the opening and the room within lit-up. Hidget looked around. The classroom was oval shaped, close to 12 mits wide and 8 mits deep. There was a large flatpanel in the center of the wall opposite the entrance with the Common alphabet lined up under it. To either side were curved windows, currently with the shades drawn. There were signs above the windows marking them as emergency exits. The space was large enough for about thirty or so citizen children. She figured they could get a lot more cousin squirrel children in this same space. There were sitting pillows stacked in piles to one side. A water fountain at cousin squirrel height was mounted to the wall just to the right of the entrance. Looking back at the entrance there was an exit sign above it and on the wall in the stairwell, signs directing to go up or down to exit and the restroom on the floor below.

Butternut tapped an icon on her personal flatpanel and the shades rolled aside to show the forest canopy around them. Hidget went over to one of the windows and looked about. She gulped briefly when she looked down. It was as she had been warned. They were at least 15 mits up in the tree canopy.

“Wow,” she uttered. “Will the students need to come-up the stairs or enter from above?”

“No to either option,” Butternut replied, tapping another icon and the window panel in front of her slid down into the tree. “They’ll come straight in from outside.”

Hidget jumped back and looked up. The ‘emergency’ portion of the sign above that particular window vanished, sliding behind the ‘exit’ part.

“How is the connection to the world network?”

“Satellite link. Do you want me to pull-up a specific lesson or education channel?”

“No, that’s alright. Power? You seem too far out here to be connected to the village’s small power transmitter.”

“You’re correct. Solar with battery back-up.”

Hidget nodded. “I’m impressed. I’ve been in small towns and villages that would be envious for a set-up like this.”

“The Council of Elders wanted to make sure we had the proper equipment to teach.”

“What about personal flatpanels?”

Butternut drooped her tail. “That’s been a little more of a challenge as most of the meager resources of this new colony/village has gone into the creation of this classroom. We’ve received a donation of more than 100 used ones.”

“And not all of them are usable.”

“Correct.”

“Sadly, that’s not much different than elsewhere. We’ll find some way to make it work.”

“I’ll show you to your room unless you have more questions about this classroom.”

“No, that will be fine. Thank you, Butternut. I appreciate being offered a room. I figured I’d have to find something in the nearby village.”

She led her up the stairs. “I’ve been warned it snows a lot here, Hidget. You’ll be thankful for having a room here when that happens.”

“So, I’ve heard.”

“The village has a tunnel system. We don’t yet.”

“Tunnel system?”

“So, they can still interact with each other despite the snow.”

“It gets that bad?”

“Remember when I had the Ambassador show you how high up we were in Jessophat’s tree?”

She nodded.

“The classroom is about at the same level. The snow reached within 3 mits of that entrance last winter. Jessophat has said he’s had years where he has had to dig-out his entrance.”

Hidget hesitated on the stairs for a moment in shock as she tried to envision that much snow. She hurried to catch-up with Butternut.

“Here we are. Our home is your home.” Butternut showed her around the simple, but nicely furnished living space. Hidget was impressed by the height-adjusting counters in the kitchen. Butternut then led her up another level and showed her and Raoul’s bedroom. The bathroom with its soaker tub. Hidget was as impressed with the soaker tub as the counters in the kitchen, not expecting anything like that out here in the ‘wilderness’. Finally, she was led to the spare room that would serve as her bedroom. Her bag was sitting on the hammock.

“Make yourself at home. We’ll be having dinner at Jessophat’s and Carulin’s early this evening. Their tree is back where you first arrived. Raoul can show you a way through the canopy that will not involve any jumps, though I get nervous when he does that, or he can lead you down and along the ground. Do you need anything before then?” Butternut curled her tail up behind herself briefly.

“No, I’m fine. Thank you.”

Butternut nodded and darted out.

EIGHT

Blossom and Saniel made their way down to Pekan’s office. The beaver assistant lead them in. Blossom bounded right over and hugged the fisher. Saniel actually felt a little fear. Pekan was so huge. Yes, he saw him from across the cafeteria before classes started, but up close, he was a big predator. He fought down the fear, but his tail still wigwagged a little.

“I’m sorry, Master Saniel,” Pekan stated after Blossom pulled out of the hug. “I know my kind can be scary to some prey species. He scooted down and made himself look a little smaller. As he did so, his beaver assistant brought in a tray with tea and water. “Please sit have some tea or water if you wish.”

Saniel poured himself a little tea and some for Blossom after she nodded at him. “Sir, are we in trouble?”

Pekan chuckled. “No, Master Saniel. I try to meet one-on-one with all the new students a week or two into their first term here. I asked to meet you two together as you’re both from the same village, this new place called The Refuge where cousins and citizens live together. How are you adjusting?”

Blossom sipped her tea. She successfully didn't spill any on her fur this time. It was different than the last batch she had here in mid-summer, but still good. They made small talk for a while as Saniel and Butternut explained how things were going alright for them. Pekan nodded and provided encouragement to both of them.

After 25 ceclicks, Pekan stated, "I need your help."

"Why do you need our help?" Blossom asked as her tail raised briefly in a curl behind her back.

"I don't speak chitter, Ms. Blossom. You two do. I need to meet with the squirrel in charge of this forest, an Elder, right? And I need someone to translate for each of us."

Blossom nearly dropped her teacup. Saniel nervously wigwagged his tail.

"That may not be easy, Schoolmaster Pekan," she replied. "I met him only once. This Elder doesn't like Biggens. After Father and I saw him this past summer, the Elder gave me permission to enter only the portion of the forest in sight of the school. It is my 'territory'. I am not allowed to cross others' territories again."

Pekan sighed. "That's too bad. But I still must try to talk to him if he doesn't flee from me in fear. Otherwise, it will be difficult to teach part of the curriculum."

Saniel's eyes shot wide. "The ban that is in place for all forests until further notice because of the arsonists north of Forestdale last spring. You need his permission so the students can do the portion of the biology courses that involve the forest, right?"

"Exactly, Master Saniel."

Saniel turned to Blossom. "Teacher taught us the chitter-call to use when an elder is needed. It is the same in both his old forest and ours as confirmed by your grandmother, Tassel. I bet it's the same here."

"The Elder will be very angry if I call him that way," Blossom warned wagging her tail back and forth.

"Then I will be the one to call him," Saniel replied. "He can be mad at me."

"Alright. But we should have a pile of nuts ready for him."

Saniel glanced out the window. "If you want to try it now, Schoolmaster, we need to get moving. There's only about a klick-and-half of light left. Otherwise, it needs to wait."

"I'll excuse you both from class first thing tomorrow, but you'll have to make-up what you miss. I don't want to rush this negotiation."

They nodded and left. Outside, Blossom turned to Saniel. "We should warn Brave to stay away."

“I’m on it.”

“No, I’ll go.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded.

Saniel nodded in return. “Oh, and Blossom...”

She paused a moment and looked at him.

“I now know what it feels like for you with us Biggens. I wanted to flee when I first saw the Schoolmaster up close. I don’t know how you handle it so well.”

She nodded. “It is hard. Now you know how I feel day in and day out here, despite a lot of practice as Father taught me. I’ll go warn Brave now. I won’t be long.”

NINE

Butternut and Hidget were in the classroom testing the donated flatpanels, making three piles, those that were useable as is, those that either needed repairs or a little work, and those not worth repairing. They looked up as others arrived, scratching at the doorway before entering.

“Elders Teacher, Tassel, Foxy, and Pinecone,” Butternut greeted in chitterspeak. She and Hidget bowed slightly. “What brings you here?”

“After much discussion,” Tassel replied, “it decided Elders should learn hear Biggenspeak, learn Biggenspeak symbols, and use Biggen viewer like Pinecone to speak Biggenspeak.”

“We must speak to Biggens in our roles as Elders,” Teacher added. “Pinecone and Kind no always around. Elder Voice Friend is away a lot doing what he must for The Refuge.”

“May we attend your class with pups so we may learn?” Foxy asked.

Butternut turned to Pinecone. “You know Biggenspeak, why you here?”

“I offer to help teach what I know,” she replied.

Butternut turned to Hidget. “Do you have any objections, Mentor?”

Hidget wigwagged her tail left to right and back. “You lead teacher, Butternut. My role is to mentor as needed. Extra adult in class would be good.” She pulled out her flatpanel a moment and looked something up and switched to Common. “As long as at least one of them is present with us, we can increase the class size again. You would be able to go from three sessions to two based on the number of pups who wish to learn Biggen things.”

Butternut’s eye lit up as she nodded. She turned to the Elders. “Teacher, Tassel, and Foxy, so many pups want to learn Biggen things. I had planned to hold classes three times each day, morning, late morning close to midday and three pawspans before sunset. With you present, I can do morning and just past midday. I could teach each pup more in less days. You must decide who attend morning and midday session.”

They wigwagged their tails up and down once in agreement and looked at each other briefly.

“I will attend mornings,” Teacher respond.

“After midday,” Tassel and Foxy responded in near unison.

“Both to help,” Pinecone replied.

“Good. All except Pinecone I give you homework now.”

They looked at her with confusion clearly showing on their muzzles.

“Homework is learning that requires some planning on your part. I want you to think on this. Class start in two days. On first day, I will ask you to speak a short story about yourself to the pups in chitterspeak. After you learn enough Biggenspeak, you will have a Biggen viewer speak the same story for you again in front of the pups in Biggenspeak. As Biggenspeak have more words, the Biggenspeak version should use more words too.”

Tassel, Teacher, and Foxy nodded flicking their tails up and down once.

Butternut turned to Pinecone. “We still have five tens Biggen viewers to test.”

Pinecone wigwagged her tail up and down once. “Yes, I can help test.”

“Can you show them how to test them? I know Teacher knows how to turn one on and place a call to his great grandpup.”

Pinecone again wigwagged her tail up and down once. She and the other Elders were soon helping Butternut and Hidget test the remaining flatpanels.

TEN

The following morning Saniel, Blossom, and Pekan entered the edge of the forest. Saniel climbed a tree and took a deep breath. Before he could call out, a squirrel with a bitten ear dropped onto the branch in front of him and chittergrowled.

“Why you here, Biggen?!” he snapped.

Saniel was briefly startled. “This my potential mate’s territory. As such, she allow me in it.” He pointed down with his tail. “If you are the Elder, our Biggen teaching Elder wish speak to you, elder-to-elder.”

“Pup of pup warn me you would come,” he replied gruffly. “If Biggen Teach Elder wish speak, he come up here.”

“He no scare you, Elder?”

“Biggens no allowed hunt smart squirrels. You no scare me. He no scare me. He want speak, he come up here.” The elder thrashed his tail about in agitation.

Saniel looked down and relayed the Elder’s wishes. Pekan spoke and Blossom translated. “I old Elder. I no good climb. I come partway. You come partway. This one,” he pointed to Blossom as she translated, “chitterspeak for me. That one,” he pointed-up to Saniel, “Biggenspeak for you.”

The Elder flicked his tail up and down once in agreement. They met on a branch large enough to support Pekan about 5 mits up. Blossom had a backpack on that she wiggled off to show the Elder it was full of butternuts. The Elder’s tail wigwagged nervously, the only fear he showed with Saniel and more so due to Pekan close by, though all of them could smell he was scared. The Elder refused to admit he was scared and stood his ground on the branch.

“Speak, is harvest time. Winter come quick. I have little time for Biggen concerns,” the Elder barked before he started nibbling on one of the offered butternuts.

Pekan bowed as Blossom had instructed him. He spoke quietly so as to not spook the Elder and was careful not to smile so as to not show his fangs. She translated for him as he said she would. “Thank you for taking the time, Elder. I am the head teaching elder here. My Biggen name no translate in chitterspeak. I and the other teaching elders teach two hundred older Biggen pups Biggen things here.” He paused as he watched Blossom flash all ten claws over and over.

The Elder whistled. “That lot of pups to tend. Why you speak to me on this?”

Saniel translated word for word and added, “I think he wants you to get to the point, Schoolmaster.”

The Elder glared at him. “I know you speak more than what I speak.”

“Yes, Elder. I explain your time is important and he should speak exactly why he ask to speak to you.”

Blossom translated this exchange for Peka who nodded.

“Some of the Biggen things we teach include the trees of the forest and the animals that live in it. I know you know that Biggens banned from forest because of bad Biggens elsewhere. I ask permission to bring Biggen pups into your forest to learn about the forest.”

“Good you no waste time.” He wigwagged his tail left to right and back.

“That tail wigwag is no, Schoolmaster,” Saniel translated.

Peka sighed briefly. “Why no allow, Elder?”

“I allow small Biggen within sight of Biggen teaching place. That good enough. You want teach in forest teach here. You and Biggen pups stay out of my forest.” He chattergrowled and turned to Saniel. “You will speak no more of your forest to other squirrels here. You will keep to the part of the forest you allowed in.”

Saniel flicked his tail up and down once bowing to the elder. “Yes, Elder.”

The Elder turned to Butternut. “I warned you no choose squirrel my forest for mate!”

“Elder, I have obeyed,” she moved over by Saniel and nuzzled him. “This one my potential mate. I speak to you in summer and promised I no choose squirrel in your forest.”

Again, the Elder chittergrowled. “You lie. I know you choose pup of pup.”

Blossom chatterspat at the Elder. “I no lie, Elder. Your pup of pup try get me choose him. He try hard. He bring me food. He praise me. I tell him I still pup and no see first winter yet. He no believe. He no fear potential mate. He challenge potential mate. I forbid fight. I know he lose if he try fight my potential mate.”

The Elder’s eyes narrowed. “You no need worry he ask you again.” He wigwagged his tail in agitation and darted back into the forest.

All three of them stared off into the trees through which the Elder vanished.

Peka sighed again. “That didn’t go well.”

Blossom and Saniel nodded. Saniel’s eyes suddenly went wide.

“Brave!”

“What? Who’s Brave?” Pekan asked.

“It is the name I gave the Elder’s grandson after he tried to fight me to win Blossom for himself, Schoolmaster. The Elder said we don’t need to worry about him asking Blossom to choose him anymore.”

“Oh, Creator, no!” Blossom’s tail started to wigwag in worry. “Do you think he would do that?”

“There’s only one way to find-out,” Saniel replied and darted off into the forest straight towards Brave’s territory.

“Do what?” Pekan asked

Blossom turned to the fisher. “Harm him in punishment. You observed how gruff he is.”

“Harm his own fur and blood?!” He scooted down the tree as quickly as he could. “Show me the way, Blossom. Saniel may need our assistance.”

The two of them entered the forest, Blossom leaping branch-to-branch and Pekan following as best he could on the ground smashing through the undergrowth. Stealth was obviously not needed.

Saniel could easily hear Pekan crashing through the undergrowth. “Over this way, Schoolmaster,” he called out. “I’ve already summoned a hovercraft.”

Blossom was by his side first. She cried-out when she saw Brave’s bloody, mauled body. “No!”

“He’s still breathing, Blossom. There’s little we can do here. We need to get him to a hospital.”

Pekan arrived at the same time as the hovercraft. Without being asked, he got into the craft and pulled out a meal tray to use as a makeshift stretcher. With Saniel’s help they gingerly lifted Brave onto the tray. Pekan then carried the tray into the hovercraft.

Pekan uttered something under his breath that neither Blossom nor Saniel could quite hear as they joined him in the hovercraft. It quickly powered up and zoomed into the city. Though Pekan remained silent the rest of the trip to the hospital, both Blossom and Saniel gave him as much space as they could due to his tense body language. Both wigwagged their tails nervously.

ELEVEN

Very slowly, Brave began to stir. He hurt all over. There were many strange sounds and scents around him, but one that was also very familiar. He felt someone gently grooming him on the back of the neck. Slowly, he opened his eyes and then closed them again due to the brightness. It was nearly like staring up at the sun in summer. Again, he half opened them and chattered nervously. Even that hurt to do. The squirrel he saw near him matched her scent. He couldn't believe it.

"Blossom?" he uttered. "So thirsty."

She nudged a dish of water where he could lap at it. He lapped for a long time. Once his thirst was sated, he looked at himself, though he couldn't move much. He had no concept to compare to much of what he saw. There were strange white things all over his body covering his wounds all of which ached. "Where are we?" he finally muttered. He tried to wigwag his tail but couldn't move it. He started to get scared. "Why can I no move my tail?"

"Hush and be calm, Brave. You safe here. This Biggen healing place. We, Energy, Biggen teaching Elder, and I, found you in forest badly injured and brought you here. You must go slow, Brave. You have many long, deep cuts healers bound. If you no move slow, wounds may reopen. She nudged the thing over his left forelimb. "Your forelimb is broken. This Biggen tool hold it in place to heal. Your tail was nearly bit off," she held out her paws about the third of the length of his tail, "that close to base of tail. Healers work long time on your tail and it should heal. It may no be straight when healed, but you will still have it. Like your forelimb it is bound in place to help it heal. Is why you no can move it."

"I thought I die on forest floor. So much blood. I smell fisher and hear it crash through bushes. Thought I hear Energy nearby. Then sleep until I wake here."

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once. "Teaching Elder is Biggen Fisher. You lose much blood, Brave. Almost die. Biggen healers speak if you wake, you live. I glad you wake. Healers speak you will need a long time to heal. Possibly a full season, my potential second mate."

"Potential second mate?" Brave felt joy in his heart despite the physical pain he felt.

"You lose much blood. Healers take blood from me and put in you. Is why you live. You need lot of blood. I too need time to recover. Elders my forest rule in past, this no count as mates as we no both choose to share blood. I give blood or you die. I could no let you die, Brave. I very tired. Sleep again. Healers speak I will be this way for two or three," she held up two and then three claws, "days as my body works to replace blood healers take for you. I give as much as I could give. Healers scared take that much. But you needed a lot." She snuggled up to him again, yawned, licked his cheek, and was quickly asleep.

Despite the pain and not being able to move much, Brave was soon asleep too with Blossom curled up next to him.

When Brave next opened his eyes, there was another squirrel nearby, laying there, quietly watching him. He wigwagged his tail in greeting, the tip missing. There was a small white Biggen-thing on his left forelimb. Blossom wasn't around.

"Hello, Brave, my son," Aldin greeted. "My people have more chitterspeak. That mean male pup."

There was confusion on Brave's muzzle. "You no my sire. My sire die when I pup."

Aldin drooped his tail. "I sorry, Brave, you lose sire when you pup." He paused a moment. "When I arrive, healers speak you need more blood. Blossom could give no more, but I could give some." He raised his forelimb with the white Biggen-thing on it. "I may no sire you, but my blood now is in you. My daughter, that is female pup, Blossom, speak she choose you as second potential mate. As far as I concern, that makes you like my son."

Before they could converse further, Blossom returned. She and Aldin nuzzled each other briefly before she snuggled down next to Brave.

"I need make bad water," Brave stated.

Aldin called out something in Biggenspeak and two Biggens, a squirrel and a beaver, arrived carrying a white biggen-thing. Aldin turned to Brave as Blossom moved to the side.

"They are going to lift you up and place you on Biggen thing. It will catch and hold bad water you make. If you need to leave pellets, do that too."

Brave was scared, but too weak to resist. The beaver gently lifted him up while the squirrel placed the Biggen thing under him. The beaver then set him carefully on top of it. It was cold to his paws. There was a gap in the thing between his legs.

"Go ahead," Aldin instructed. "Healers will have Biggen squirrel nearby at all times, Brave. If you need make bad water again after this, ask Biggen squirrel for help."

Brave urinated for a very long time. Before he was through, he took Aldin's advice and defecated several pellets that made a wet, echoing sound as they landed in the thing. When he finished, the beaver again lifted him up gently. The squirrel moved the Biggen thing out of the way and then took another Biggen thing, this one floppy, soft and with a strange smell. With it, he cleaned Brave's backend. It was damp against his fur and skin and smelled strange. The beaver then gently set him back on his hammock-bed.

Brave felt embarrassment over being cleaned like a pup. "It is as dame warn me when I pup. I now like pup-forever as I trust Biggens."

Blossom nuzzled him again trying to comfort him as she rejoined him on the hammock-bed. "You fit name Energy give you, Brave. You did no try to struggle as they helped you. You must

be patient. In time, as you heal, you will do more on own. Yes, for now, your injuries make you be like young pup. Is still better than being dead.”

“There is more we must speak, Brave, but no now. Healers no allow me speak long. They speak you need more rest.”

Blossom groomed the back of Brave’s neck briefly. “Yes, potential second mate, we both need more rest.” She snuggled down next to him and both were quickly asleep again.

TWELVE

Butternut chittered to get everyone’s attention and the pups quickly fell silent. “I need all of you to take one of these,” she held-up a sitting pillow, “and pick a place to sit. See the lines on the floor? Line-up where you sit along them.”

The pups and Elder Teacher did so. Many of the pups were awed that Elder Teacher was going to learn with them. Pinecone sat to one side with Mentor Hidget watching and waiting.

“I speak learn rules. Some like Elder Teacher’s rules when he teach elder things. Some different. If you wish to learn Biggenspeak and Biggen things, you must arrive on time every day, grab a,” she switched to Common for the next word while holding up one of the sitting pillows, “cushion and sit down. If you have a question or know an answer, raise your tail up. Only speak if I pick you. If you must make bad water or pellets, go to Biggen place in hollow below this and return. Do you understand?”

All flicked their tails up and down once.

“Good. Mentor, Elder Pinecone, Elder Teacher, and I will now give you each a Biggen viewer. We will go over how it works.” As she spoke, flatpanels were handed out to the pups. “You must take good care of it. You will need it to Biggenspeak for you when time comes. We have just enough for all pups who wish to learn. If you lose or break yours you will need to ask a littermate to share theirs. That will slow down learning.”

Again, all flicked the tails up and down once. Once the flatpanels were handed out, Butternut demonstrated how to turn it on and off. The large flatpanel on the wall projected what she demonstrated. Most of the pups quickly figured it out. Elder Teacher’s flatpanel chirped and he drooped his tail as Butternut looked at him and then at the doorway. He nodded and bounded out. He returned in less than three ceclicks and raised his tail.

“What is it, Elder Teacher.”

Teacher drooped his tail. “An urgent matter I must attend to as Eldest Elder, Teacher Butternut. I no know if I’ll be able to return to class today.”

“If you can make the one after midday, I will allow you to make up then. If no, you must work on own to make-up what you miss.”

Teacher bowed. “If I see Tassel or Foxy, I ask them to take my place.” He darted out the open window, hooking his flatpanel to his backfur as he went.

The pups saw what he did and each tried to do the same. They were thrilled when their flatpanels clung to their fur but were easily removed afterward.

“Yes, that was our next step, my pups.” Butternut called out to keep the class under control. “Biggen viewer will stick to your fur like burdock but come off without tugging your fur.”

“Now, to learn Biggenspeak, you need learn Biggenspeak symbols. I will speak them in Biggenspeak.” She pointed to each letter and pronounced them. She then tapped an icon on her flatpanel. Each letter appeared in turn on their flatpanels. “Touch each symbol as it appears and the Biggenviewer will speak it.” After they finished going through the alphabet she continued. “Good. You do real good. Now I want you to go through Biggenspeak symbols three more times.”

As they finished, Butternut praised them again and tapped another icon on her flatpanel. The larger panel now showed all the letters in the Common alphabet. “I’m going to speak a symbol. You choose the symbol I speak. We see how quick you learn symbols.”

Butternut did not allow any of the pups to get discouraged if they got the wrong letter, pointing out how some look similar to each other. “I no expect you to learn all quickly. But we must start somewhere.” She looked up as Tassel arrived at the open window.

“Enter, Elder Tassel. Take a sitting thing,” she pointed to the sitting pillows with her tail, “and the pups will show you where to sit.” As she settled into place, Butternut turned to the pups. “Who can speak learn rules to Elder Tassel?” Several tails shot-up. Butternut chose one and then another and so on, letting each pup speak one rule to Tassel. Butternut praised each in turn for remembering correctly.

THIRTEEN

Blossom nuzzled Brave. “I must return to Biggen learning place. I will visit when I can, potential second mate.”

Brave bowed his head in thanks.

Aldin watched his daughter depart and then turned to Brave. “I know you still hurt all over. Are you less tired now?”

“I less tired today.”

“Good. I serve as Elder Voice for my forest, Brave. Eldest Elder Teacher wish speak to you.”

Brave chittered nervously.

“You have nothing to fear. He good Elder. He no like using title Eldest Elder. He use it when he must.” Aldin pulled his flatpanel off his back and showed it to Brave. “Has my daughter shown you Biggen viewer?”

Brave out of habit tried to move his tail and chittered in frustration before answering, “No.”

“This very special Biggen tool. It has thing like an eye in it.” Aldin pointed to a small disk opening on one side of the panel. He then swiped his paw along the screen of the panel and it lit up. Aldin held it up to him.

The panel showed Brave on it. Brave stared for a moment and reached forward with his right forepaw. The squirrel on the viewer reached out the same way at the same time. He chittered nervously. “That is me, more clear than I see when I look at self in stream or puddle.” He looked over his body in the image. “It is as Blossom and healers speak. There is a Biggen thing over my tail that keeps me from moving it, though I keep trying.”

Aldin nodded. “I wanted you to see how this works before we speak to Eldest Elder, who is still in our home forest.”

“How far is that?”

“It take two,” he held up two claws, “handspands time in Biggen flyer to get there. By paw, it would take many days.”

Brave whistled briefly.

“I will call Eldest Elder now.” Aldin swiped again at the screen and tapped a few symbols. There was a pause and then a grey furred squirrel with green eyes was watching them through the screen. Aldin peaked around the edge of the screen a moment so the camera would pick him up. “Greetings Elder Teacher. The young squirrel before you is called Brave. I will be behind Biggen viewer holding it still so you two may speak.”

“Thank you, Elder Voice Friend,” Teacher responded. He wigwagged his tail in greeting. “Hello Brave.”

Brave bowed his head. “I no worthy.”

“Hush. I know you went through a lot. And thanks to young Blossom and Biggen healers, you will see your third” he held up three claws “winter. Biggen healers do incredible work. I would no see twelve” he held up all ten claws and then two more “winter coming up if no for Biggen healers. Elders in three” he held up three claws again “forests near you call for Grand Council. Do you know what that is, Brave?”

Brave shook his head back and forth once as he couldn’t wigwag his tail.

“In very large forests, the forest is broken into sections. Each section has an Elder Council. A Grand Council is when two” he held up two claws “or more of those councils gather to discuss very important matters. It can also be a gathering of Elder Councils from different forests. It is rare that one is called because of the distance involved. This will only be the second” he held up two claws “time I have been asked to help with in my short time serving as Eldest Elder. Before I speak at this quickly called Grand Council, I need you to speak to me, Brave.”

“On what?”

“I need you to speak to me about your former Elder.”

Brave nervously chattered. “Former?”

“Well, I no expect you will return to your old territory, right?”

“No,” Brave answered quietly.

“Instead, you’ll follow your potential mate back here to what we call, ‘The Refuge.’”

“So, now you my Elder?”

Teacher smiled reassuringly. “I am part of the Elder Council here, but I no head Elder here. I was Elder in different forest before I come to ‘The Refuge’.”

“What you want me speak about sire of dame?”

Teacher tensed a bit. “The Elder is your grandsire?!” He paused a moment. “That mean sire of dame or sire of sire.”

“Yes,” Brave answered quietly. “He no like me.” Brave told him all he could from the time Teacher had first visited their forest the winter before up through the attack giving as much detail as he could. Close to a pawspan of time went by. Teacher nodded and kindly encouraged him throughout and praised him on his bravery.

“Thank you, young Brave. I will present what you speak to the Grand Council. You are no the only squirrel harmed by this Elder who has violated many of the rules Elders are to follow. He will be lucky if he only banished when this is over.” The screen went dark.

Aldin tucked the panel back on his back and turned to the young squirrel. “I echo Eldest Elder. You fit name given you by Biggen squirrel Energy. Your grandsire will be punished for what he do to you and others. Thank you.” He bowed and left the room.

Brave curled-up and wished Blossom could have stayed one more day. He could really use another someone there right now. He felt more alone then he ever felt before.

FOURTEEN

Blossom’s first day back at senior school had been very packed and busy as she had three days’ worth of lessons to make up. The worst part was learning that all were banned from setting paw in the forest until further notice, though she understood it was for everyone’s safety after what had happened to Brave. It didn’t help that she was still slightly lightheaded from the blood donation. Saniel caught up with her at lunch, which helped a bit. Her thoughts kept going back to Brave.

She nibbled on a butternut across the table from Saniel. Between mouthfuls, she briefed Saniel on Brave. “...And so, the doctors figure he’ll be in the hospital for about a month.” She sighed.

“That’s not too bad considered what kind of shape he was in.”

“Saniel, Autumn is nearly half-over. There will be snow on the ground by then. Not only will there not be enough food gathered for him, but he’s also going to have those casts on until at least mid-winter.”

Saniel drooped his tail. “Oh, so he can’t go back to his territory when he’s released, provided its safe by then for him to do so.”

“Which means he’ll need to finish his recover at The Refuge, among a bunch of strangers he doesn’t know as I doubt the Schoolmaster will allow us to bring him here.”

“It’ll be hard on him at first at The Refuge, but I’m sure he’ll get used to it. That would be a lot easier than to expect him to remain calm surrounded here by Biggens.”

Blossom looked towards one of the windows facing the forest. “Yes, I hope so.”

The afternoon seemed to fly by quickly for Blossom. She felt nearly overwhelmed by how much she had missed in the past three days between the normal coursework and the remedial coursework. She seemed a bit elsewhere to Saniel and the others at dinner.

He asked her a question and she didn't respond. He looked at the others at the table, got off his cushion, moved over next to her and gently nudged her. "Hey, Blossom, are you alright?"

She blinked a moment and turned to him. "I'm sorry, Saniel. My mind was elsewhere. Yes, I'm fine. Just very tired." She paused a moment. "And I feel a bit overwhelmed by what I need to make-up after being in the hospital the past three days."

"Recovering from saving another's life, you mean," he replied.

"That was very selfless of you," Moselyn added having not had much time to speak to her roommate about what happened.

Saniel glanced over at Moselyn as he replied. "If Moselyn doesn't mind, I can spend some time with you this evening and help you study." Moselyn nodded as he finished the sentence.

"Don't you have your own coursework to study, Saniel?"

"I do, but I haven't missed three days of classes either. I can take a little time and help you catch-up."

True to his word, Saniel spent a couple clicks in the evening helping Blossom with her studies until she started to nod off.

"I guess it's time to call it a night, huh?" he asked as he closed the textbook on his flatpanel and attached it to his hip.

"Please stay," she pleaded. "I need company tonight."

Saniel glanced over at Moselyn. "Will you allow me to spend the night?"

Moselyn was caught off guard, but barely hesitated before answering, "Of course."

Saniel reached for her forepaw in his, bowed and gently kissed it. "Thank you." He turned to Blossom. "I need to use the bathroom and will return shortly."

While he was out of the room, Blossom thanked Moselyn. Before she could reply back, Saniel had returned, tapping a quick message on his flatpanel.

"I'm just alerting Drexle that I'll be here tonight." He set the flatpanel on a side table near the nest and crawled in with Blossom quickly joining him. The two of them snuggled down together and Blossom was quickly asleep.

Moselyn felt a bit envious as she glanced over at the other two. She was caught off guard when she realized Saniel was still awake and watching her. He tapped a space in the nest next to him and Blossom with his tail.

“You could join us if you wish,” Saniel whispered. “I think Blossom needs extra snuggling tonight. It’s been several rough days for her.”

Moselyn hesitated for a moment and then came over. “Are you sure?”

Saniel flicked his tail up and down once and nodded. She crawled into the space Saniel had indicated and found the nest was more comfortable than she had expected. She curled up on the other side of Blossom from Saniel and found herself facing him muzzle-to-muzzle. She was slightly startled when he gently licked her cheek fur.

“See, it’s not that bad. Good night, Moselyn and thank you for letting me stay.”

Saniel quickly drifted to sleep as she watched. She soon was asleep herself.

FIFTEEN

Two hovercrafts quickly raced into the forest. Two others soon joined them coming from different directions. All four settled on the forest floor and the doors opened. Cousin squirrels bounded out of three of the craft. Behind them, a biggen squirrel stood in each doorway. A biggen female marten stepped out of the fourth. A metal badge on her chestfur twinkled in the sunlight. She turned to the cousin gray squirrel who followed her out. She then looked about at the other squirrels who kept their distance from her as they nervously wigwagged their tails briefly.

One of the cousin squirrels looked at the others. Those others each flicked their tails up and down once. The first squirrel nodded, took a deep breath and chattered out the Elder Council summons call. The others took it up. They then all fell silent. Soon, there were squirrels in the trees all around them.

Among them, one with a bitten ear glared down at the intruders. “Be gone!”

Aldin turned to the marten. “Do what you need to do, Constable Jeanna.” He paused. “Excuse me. That’s Ambassador Jeanna.”

The marten bowed to the squirrel. “I’ll do the best I can as he needs to stand trial, Ambassador Aldin.”

The marten quickly climbed the nearest tree and vanished from sight. The squirrels within the trees scattered as the marten climbed, including the one with the bit ear, all calling out about the

predator. The cousin squirrels on the ground near the hovercrafts nervously flicked their tails but fought down the urge to flee/climb themselves. They gathered in a group and waited. Soon, they heard the cry of a panicked squirrel having been caught. It was scream-chattering in fear at the top of its lungs. The marten returned climbing back down a tree with the cousin squirrel with a bit ear firmly in its mouth. The marten pulled a cage out of the hovercraft she had ridden in. She opened the door, spat out her prey into the cage, and latched the door shut. The cousin squirrel within threw itself at the bars.

“Let me out, Biggen!” it chatterspat. It quickly fell silent as it saw all the other cousin squirrels gather around his cage as the biggen marten returned to Aldin’s side. Again, the gathered cousin squirrels called out the summons call. Slowly, the other cousin squirrels returned, many nervously wigwagging their tails.

One of those who arrived in the hovercrafts scampered forward and glared at the squirrel in the cage. “I, head Elder of forest to sunrise of Biggen colony call a Grand Council!” she shouted loud enough for those in the trees to hear.

Another cousin squirrel scampered forward. “I, head Elder of forest in direction of long shadows from Biggen Colony concur. A Grand Council must be called!”

A third cousin squirrel scampered forward. “I, head Elder of forest opposite long shadows from Biggen Colony concur. We must hold a Grand Council!”

Teacher scampered forward, whom the former Elder in the cage now recognized. “You!” he spat at Teacher.

Teacher ignored him. “As requested by the Elder Councils of three” he held up three claws, “forests, I, Eldest Elder, declare this Grand Council is in session!”

Through all of this, Aldin quietly translated the proceedings for Jeanna, the marten constable.

Teacher turned to the others and those in the trees. “You now know there are Elders here from three,” again he held up three claws, “forests. I am known as the Eldest Elder. Having travelled the whole world giving news of changes to rules Biggen Elders make about us, I had met no squirrel who see twelve” he held up all ten claws and two more “winters as I will this winter. These other Elders asked me to preside over this Grand Council. Due to the nature of the issue, I sent my Elder Voice to Biggen Elders,” he pointed to Aldin with his tail, “to ask for their help. They provide the Biggen flyers here with Biggen Squirrels to control them to enable these Elders to arrive here quickly for this Grand Council. The Biggens also appointed an Elder Voice to us, this marten, to assist us as needed. She serve as Biggen Elder Rules Enforcer to other Biggens.” Teacher turned to the three Elders. “What is the reason you have requested this Grand Council?”

“The Elder of this forest break many Elder rules,” the first Elder responded. “He must be punished.”

“Speak your accusations. Bring your witnesses,” Teacher responded.

Over the next two handspands of time, over a dozen female cousin squirrels among those who had ridden there in the hovercrafts stood forth and testified that the Elder had forced them to couple with him. They had then fled to the other forests to seek refuge. The biggen squirrel hovercraft pilots bristled their fur and lashed their tails about as they listened to the testimony. Jeanna barely kept in her rage as Aldin provided their rapes in detail to her word-for-word as the victims testified. He would pause from the translation at times to reassure her that he was as outraged as she was.

“I am glad I didn’t know the extent of his crimes or I would have only brought you his body,” she quietly confided to Aldin. “Even if it meant the end of my career as a constable.”

One squirrel tearfully spoke how her mate tried to protect her, but the Elder killed him and then threatened to kill her pups if she tried to resist him coupling with her. It was her mate who had bitten off the Elder’s ear tip.

Teacher’s eyes narrowed as he glared at the former Elder in the cage. “Do you deny what they speak?”

The former Elder chatterspat back at Teacher. “This my forest! My rules! All females are mine! I no recognize your Grand Council! Release me!” He thumped his tail against the wire wall of the cage.

Teacher glared at the former Elder. “We are squirrels! We are no deer! We no fight off all other males to claim all females as our own!” Teacher chatterspat at the caged squirrel. “Even dumb deer know to no couple with their own pup!” He pointed to the Elder’s daughter with his tail, one of those who had testified against him. He looked up in the trees. “If any of you wish to testify against your Elder, now is the time to speak. I promise you are safe to speak.”

Several stepped forward with similar tales of rape and murder. The former Elder railed in his cage until Jeanna threatened to injure him.

After the last victim testified, a male stepped forward from among those who arrived in the hovercraft.

“My territory is close to Biggen learn place. Territory of pup of Elder’s pup is between my territory and Biggen learn place.” He held-up four claws. “days ago, I see Elder attack pup of pup.” He drooped his tail. “I coward. I no go to help. I hide in my tree hollow in fear. When Elder leave, I see pup of pup’s bloody body on forest floor. I flee to forest to sunrise of Biggen colony and report what I see to Elders there.” He glared at the Elder in the cage.

The Elder of that forest stepped forward. “We have taken in many who flee this forest from this Elder and hear their tales. Until now we no know we could do anything to help. What this squirrel speak was last we could take. When an Elder kills his own pup of pup, we had to call Grand Council. We turned to Eldest Elder for help with call. Thanks to Biggen viewers we could ask for that help.”

Teacher stepped forward. “Except that pup of pup no die.” All stared at him. He continued, “Biggens and Elder Voice Friend’s pup found him barely alive and took him to Biggen healer.” He glared at the squirrel in the cage. “Your latest victim lives. He speak his story to me through Biggen viewer. That special Biggen tool remembers and will repeat his story now” Teacher turned towards Aldin. “Elder Voice show the others using your Biggen viewer what squirrel who takes name, Brave, speak.”

Aldin called up the recording of Brave’s testimony. He provided a running translation for Jeanna, who became more and more visibly agitated. All the cousin squirrels on the ground nervously watched the Biggen marten.

As Aldin tucked his flatpanel back on his back, Teacher turned to him again. “I see Biggen Elder Voice is mad as us at what this Elder do. Ask her how Biggens punish for this.” Aldin translated this for the constable.

“Our parliament appointed me ambassador for this Grand Council as cousin squirrel Elders asked for ‘Biggen’ assistance, which I have given,” Jeanna paused a moment before continuing. “Back when I was a young adult, my father taught me to hunt. Biggens do not need to hunt to live, but he insisted I learn in case a disaster strike so I could survive. We hunt small rodents. I felt remorse in killing and eating those we hunted.” She glared at the caged elder. “I feel no remorse in stating I would have killed that one earlier if I had known all he was accused of doing.” She paused again. “As for punishment, for rape, the rapist is castrated. For a single murder, the killer would be locked in jail for no less than twenty years. There is no forgiving someone who tries to kill their own fur and blood. There is more I must speak if you find him guilty.”

Teacher and the others listened to the translation with Aldin explaining Biggens live long lives.

“Those who force coupling, punishment is same. Male member bit off,” spoke several among the other squirrels. One of them asked the marten, “Biggens no kill those who kill other Biggens?”

“Only if they resist punishment,” Jeanna answered, “try to kill while being punished, or have killed many other ‘Biggens’ before being caught and punished. If the accused cousin squirrel were a ‘Biggen’ and found guilty, he would probably be killed. To my knowledge, no ‘Biggen’ in living memory has committed this many rapes and murders other than those who burned the forest near Forestdale who we have not yet found.”

The one who asked bowed in thanks after Aldin finished the translation explaining that Forestdale was a distant, Biggen colony four times the size of the local one and that the destruction of that forest resulted in the current rule barring Biggens from entering smart squirrel territory without permission.

The various elders moved off to one side in a circle and quietly discussed the situation. Eventually, their tails raised. More discussion, and their tails all raised again. Even more discussion, and their tails all raised a third time. Throughout, Teacher didn’t move his tail one

way or the other. He simply listened. They came back over and gathered around the cage. They turned to Teacher.

“The Grand Council has chosen me to speak for them,” Teacher spoke. “As you observed I no vote. Is no my place to vote as one who oversee. You are Elder no more. You have been found guilty of forced coupling many females, hunt kill several males, and attempt to hunt kill your pup of pup. You have gravely broken the rules of Elders. The punishment for forced coupling is your male member is to be bitten off. For hunt kill and attempted hunt kill you are banished from all forests with smart squirrels OR you die. We let you choose your punishment. Death or life in banishment. If choose death your male member will no be bitten off.”

The squirrel in the cage chatterspat at them. “I no choose! This my forest! I no recognize your Grand Council!”

Teacher shook his head in disgust as the former Elder refused to accept any responsibility for his actions even after all the testimony spoken in front of him.

“If I may, Eldest Elder?” Jeanna asked. Teacher flicked his tail up and down once and the marten continued. “As I was instructed by Parliament, should this squirrel be found guilty of rape or murder, we no longer recognize him as a squirrel. We now deem him a large rodent. As such, any ‘Biggen’ may hunt him if they see him.” She bared her teeth at the caged squirrel. “That includes me. I would gladly make him suffer as he made his grandson suffer, except, I promise you no healer would save his life.”

Aldin shuddered as he translated. As he finished, he raised his tail and was recognized. “Eldest Elder, as you know, but they,” he gestured around to all others present, “I speak a lot to Biggens. Biggens in big colony Forestdale, I speak of earlier have what they call a,” he switched to Biggenspeak for the next word before switching back, “park, a small forest in center of the colony. This one is just large enough that it could support one smart squirrel. It has no squirrels. It is two days travel from the edge of that small park through the colony to the nearest forest. They are willing to host this ‘large rodent’ in that park. Should he try to leave the park, he will be hunted and killed.”

Teacher bowed in thanks. “That is the Biggen colony near forest that burn that Foxy’s people came from?” He briefly held his tail up in a curl.

Aldin flicked his tail up and down once.

Teacher flicked his tail up and down once. “Good. Is so far away, this former Elder would never be able to return without Biggen help.” Teacher turned to the former Elder again. “Last chance to choose own fate or it go to vote.”

The squirrel in the cage chatterspat at him. “As I speak, I no choose! You have no right do this to me! This my forest! My rules!”

Teacher shook his head in disgust at the caged former Elder. He turned to the squirrels in the trees and the others who testified. "It is up to you. And your former Elder show no remorse for what he do. By show of tails: Hunt kill?" Some tails were raised. Aldin and Jeanna counted. When they finished, Teacher then asked, "Bite off male member and banishment." All the other tails were raised, more than double the number that chose death. Some called out as they raised their tails, "Hunt kill too merciful for what he do even if Biggen marten hunt kill him slowly or eat him without kill first!"

Teacher turned one more time to the former Elder. "As chosen by those you abused, your male member will be bit off and you will be banished." Teacher turned to Jeanna. "Biggen Elder Voice, we ask for your help on more time. Please hold down the former Elder so his male member may be bit off."

Jeanna listened to the translation. "Tell them, I will bite it off for them."

"No, you will hold him down for us," Teacher replied without waiting for the translation. "I can hear Biggenspeak, Biggen Elder Voice. We will allow two of his victims to carryout the punishment."

Jeanna nodded. She tilted the cage up on its end, standing behind it. Reaching around she yanked the former Elder's rear legs through the bars, forcing his underside and belly against the edge of the cage. The Elder chattergrowled as he struggled in vain against the strength of the marten. Two of the females came forward. The former Elder cried out briefly before fainting after the deed was done. The females spat out his scrotum, testicles, and most of his penis they had bitten off. Jeanna pulled a first aid kit out of the hovercraft and quickly treated the former Elder's wounds to prevent him from bleeding to death on the spot.

"Place him in our hovercraft, Ambassador Jeanna, please," Aldin requested.

"You take him to other Biggen Colony now?" Teacher asked.

Aldin flicked his tail up and down once. "After a trip to a healer so he no bleed to death. What Biggen Elder Voice do will no hold."

"Good. That leaves this Council one more task."

Aldin looked to Teacher to continue.

"We must appoint a new Elder here. Even if he really had one in training, that squirrel would no be fit to serve as Elder."

Aldin flicked his tail up and down once in agreement. He turned Jeanna the marten. "Constable, your service as Ambassador is finished and the Elders appreciate your assistance. After I go to the hospital, I can fly you back to your office before I transport the prisoner to the flutterport."

"Thank you, Ambassador, but I will summon a separate hovercraft. If I get in that craft again

with that vile creature in that cage, I will be too tempted to finish him. I must respect your council's decision to let him live even if I do not agree with that decision."

Aldin bowed. "Very well."

SIXTEEN

Moselyn stirred a little. Someone gently nuzzled the back of her neck. Her eyes snapped open as she quickly sat up.

"See, I told you, it wouldn't take much to get her to move," Blossom gigglechittered from next to her. "Thank you for finally getting off my tail, roommate." Blossom leapt out of the nest and quickly scampered out of the room.

Moselyn rubbed her eyes with the back of her paws. She couldn't believe it was morning already. She had slept soundly. She was startled again when a tail lightly brushed her cheek.

"Hey," Saniel spoke now that he had her attention. "Thank you, again, Moselyn, for letting me stay and for joining us. I really think it helped her last night."

She grabbed her tail to prevent it from wigwagging back and forth. "I slept soundly. I never sleep soundly."

Saniel gigglechittered. "Maybe you just needed company and the feeling of safety it brings to the cousin deep inside." He held his right forepaw to his chest briefly. "And you have a lovely fur pattern, Moselyn."

Her eyes shot wide. "I do?"

Saniel scuffed a footpaw, looked down briefly and then back at her. "Yes. And it's been hard to not say so before now. I didn't want Blossom to get jealous. Afterall, she chose me first. But she confided with me this morning that she's fine with me noticing, especially now that she has Brave as a second potential mate." He reached over and took one of her forepaws in his and kissed it lightly. "I need to go clean-up before breakfast." He got out of the nest and made his way towards the door.

"Saniel?"

He paused and looked back at her.

"You may drop by any night and nest with Blossom and, I hope I can join you."

His eyes lit up. “Yes, of course. Thank you.”

Blossom returned as he opened the door to leave.

“See you at breakfast,” she said to him. He nodded as he left. She turned to Moselyn who was still sitting in the nest. “I’m glad you joined us last night. Was it as good as you expected it to be?”

“As I said to Saniel while you were in the bathroom, I’ve never slept so soundly.”

Blossom nodded. “Good. You should probably go freshen-up before we head down for breakfast.”

“Huh?” Moselyn replied before realizing she was still sitting in the nest. “Oh, right.”

Both Blossom and Saniel found they were summoned to see the Schoolmaster immediately after breakfast. Both were unsure why, but arrived at the office and were ushered in by Pekan’s assistant. To their surprise, there was another cousin squirrel present who was nibbling on a butternut near the fisher. She came right over to them and asked to sniff. They sniffed each other.

“I glad to meet the smart and biggen squirrels who save my pup who take name, Brave.”

“You are Brave’s dame?”

She flicked her tail up and down once.

“She is also the new local elder,” Pekan added. He held-up his flatpanel and it repeated his statement in chitterspeak. “It’s a new program still in the testing stages that translates between chitterspeak and ‘biggenspeak’.

Again, the new elder flicked her tail up and down once. “Is good Biggen tool.”

“And biggen teaching elder no scare you?”

Brave’s mother showed her wet paws. “He is scary, but I no smell blood, so I know I safe, just as Eldest Elder speak I would be.” She then gave her full attention to Blossom. “And you are pup’s potential mate?”

Saniel gigglechittered. “If she old enough, they’d already be mates, I think. Biggen healers put her blood in Brave to save Brave.”

Blossom blushed through her fur and flicked her tail up and down once in agreement. “This will be my first winter, Elder.”

Brave's mother nodded and embraced her in a hug. "When the time comes, may you bare many pups, small Biggen called Blossom."

"Does it bother you that Brave take name?"

She wigwagged her tail to left to right and back once in the negative as she released her from the embrace.

"Many things will change in this forest now that old Elder is gone." Her eyes narrowed. "He was my sire, but he was no real sire."

"Gone?" both Blossom and Saniel asked in unison.

Pekan jumped in. "Squirrel elders from three other forests came yesterday and put him on trial. He was found guilty of rape, murder, and attempted murder. He was castrated on the spot" Peka shuddered visibly, "and banished. Your father transported him to a small park in the middle of Forestdale. If he tries to leave the park, he is to be hunted and killed."

"I try to be good Elder as I've begun to learn. I hold council with those I am elder to. As decision in this case affects all, all need have say. It is decided that we will allow your teaching elders to bring Biggen pups into our forest to learn of the forest. We will allow use of..." she paused a moment trying to think of the word, "Biggen tool called backpack to help all during fall harvest. Many of the females who fled this forest plan to return in the spring. Is too late to come now. No enough time to harvest enough food for winter even with Biggen tool. If a squirrel wish take name, they may take name. I no choose one yet, but as Elder, I feel I will."

"Elder," Saniel asked, "what if some of us Biggens help you with the harvest?"

"What are you suggesting, Saniel?" Peka asked.

Saniel switched to Common as he pulled his flatpanel off his back and called up the student handbook. "Each student is expected to provide at least twenty clicks of community service. I could recruit other squirrels here who have grown out their claws like me. We could help the Elder's people with their harvest so those females could return sooner." He started to repeat his proposal in chitterspeak, but Peka's program had already repeated it back in chitterspeak.

The Elder's tail wigwagged back and forth for a bit as she remained silent. "I would need to speak this to the others as again, this would involve all. How good are you at harvest?"

"My backpack is big enough to hold you in it, Elder. My family harvest a forest near as big as yours. Until this harvest season, just the three of us, my dame, sire, and I."

The elder's eyes grew wide.

“Remember, we bigger than you. We need more food. And we trade extra food with other Biggens for Biggen things like this Biggen viewer. Let me gather five or six,” he held up five and then six claws, “other Biggen squirrels and we’ll show you. We’ll harvest for one pawspan. You show us were to stash nuts and seeds. Then you can decide if we help more. To attend Biggen learning place, we had to leave before harvest start at our home forests. It feel strange to no harvest nuts and seeds.”

“You no need nuts and seeds for yourself?”

“I and other Elders provide enough food for all pups we teach, Elder,” Pekan replied. “Their parents entrust their care to us while they are here.” He turned to Saniel. “If the Elder agrees to your proposal, I will count it as service time. Perhaps you can demonstrate how well you can harvest nuts tomorrow afternoon as there are no classes scheduled then.” He turned back to the Elder after his flatpanel finished translating his statement. “What do you think, Elder?”

She flicked her tail up and down once. “Tomorrow after midday. Come straight through forest, call out until I reply.”

Saniel bowed.

After a moment of no one talking, Blossom asked, “Does Brave know you new Elder?”

She wigwagged her tail left to right once. “No yet, but he will soon. Teaching elder will take me to him in Biggen flyer.”

SEVENTEEN

Aldin watched the prisoner as the caged squirrel slowly stirred. Eventually, the former elder opened his eyes and groaned. “Water,” he rasped.

A biggen beaver stood nearby and glanced at Aldin.

“Go ahead, Dauvin. Give him some water,” Aldin said to the beaver.

The beaver filled a small dish. Slid open a slot in the prisoner’s cage, and slipped it in.

The squirrel within slowly lapped at the water. When he had his fill, he glared at Aldin.

“My orders are to take you to your new home in banishment,” Aldin chittered. “After your male member was bit off, I take you to Biggen healer so you no bleed to death. Biggen healer also give you herbs make you sleepy, reduce pain, and keep you calm when you wake. You sleep through most of the trip. Look to your other side.”

The former elder looked at the clouds passing by out the window. He could see they were very high up and moving fast. He fearfully wigwagged his tail. “We fly higher than predator birds?”

Aldin flicked his tail up and down once. “And much faster. We in large Biggen flyer. How much Elder knowledge do you really have, former Elder? Were you taught the world is round?”

The former elder flicked his tail up and down once.

“Our world is very big. Where I take you, if you look up at sun, in your old forest, it would be six handspands higher in sky. We fly a quarter way around the world, thanks to Biggen who controls this flyer.”

The former elder drooped his tail. “Why so far?”

“Others never want you to be able to return for what you did. This so far away, you could only return with help of Biggens. We fly to large Biggen colony. Within colony is small forest big enough that you will be able to live there. Local Biggen Elders agree to let you live there if you no leave. Biggens there know what you do. As long as you stay in forest, you live. If you try and leave, Biggens will hunt and kill you. They no longer call you smart squirrel. You now big rodent. Biggens will visit forest. If you attack them, they will hunt kill you. We land in two fingers time. Biggen beaver will give you food if you are hungry.”

The former elder wigwagged his tail left to right and back once.

The drugs, the doctor had injected in the former Elder did their job. The squirrel was cooperative through the rest of the flutter flight and the follow-up in the hovercraft. Once they landed in the small park, Aldin wheeled out the former Elder’s cage and opened the door, letting him out.

The former Elder glanced briefly at Aldin and darted up the nearest tree to start exploring his new territory.

“Hello Ambassador,” Aldin heard in English from the nearest entrance to the park. He looked over at the pine marten who waved at him. Aldin scampered over near the entrance but kept his distance.

“Hello, Enhray,” he replied in English wigwagging his tail. “I thought you didn’t want to see me in person. You said you couldn’t trust yourself.”

“I’ve been working on that,” Enhray responded switching back to Common and glanced at the new sign at the entrance warning visitors about the ‘large rodent’ prisoner in the park. “I’m just as disgusted as everyone else at what the new park ‘tenant’ did to be relocated here. Some have complained to the city council about not wanting him here. A citizen found guilty on that many counts of rape and murder would die.”

“His victims judged death was too merciful. So, instead, he was castrated and is here in the closest thing to a prison for a cousin squirrel.”

“How is this a prison?”

“Provided there are no bars around the edges, but he knows if he tries to leave the park and venture out into the city, he will die, as you and any other citizen who spotted him would kill him on the spot for the very reason you stated a moment ago. So, he is basically trapped in this park and he’s all alone...”

“Just as I had been in that prison cell.”

Aldin flicked his tail up and down once. “And you were only there a few months. He has received a life sentence.”

Enhray nodded and shuddered at the thought.

“If you think you won’t attempt to hunt me, how about we go get some lunch? Well for me, it would be supper. It’s been a very long day already.”

The marten smiled. “I would love that!”

EIGHTEEN

“Brave,” the squirrel nurse chattered. “Are you awake enough for visitors?”

The young squirrel nodded. His eyes shot wide and he began to chatter nervously when a biggen fisher poked his muzzle through the doorway.

“I do not wish to scare you, young Brave,” it spoke in Biggenspeak. Much to Brave’s surprise the statement was quickly repeated in chitterspeak. “New Biggen tool let me speak in Biggenspeak and it then repeat in chitterspeak best it can. It will also hear your chitterspeak and repeat it in Biggenspeak for me. I teaching Elder. I no come any closer as I no wish to scare you worse. I glad you live. I carried you here. I come because I bring someone who is very anxious to see you.”

“Blossom?”

“No,” he responded. “She in class.”

The new Elder nervously poked her head around the corner under the fisher. She chattered excitedly as she raced over to his hammock and began to groom him in the few spots not covered with bandages. “My pup!”

“Dame?” Brave responded. “Dame! You live!” He started to groom her in turn.

“I so sorry, my pup who take name, Brave. I flee forest last summer. I should have taken you with me.”

“You flee?”

“My sire, the former Elder, forced me to couple with him.”

Brave shuddered. “I no blame you flee. He awful.”

“Elders from three other forests including the one I flee to come to our forest yesterday. They call grand council. They put old Elder on trial. His male member bit off and he banished for life.”

Brave shuddered again. “Who replace him as Elder?”

“I have, my pup. I still have a lot to learn, but I will do my best to be good Elder, unlike my sire.” She explained to him the immediate changes. “And I meet your potential mate. I hope you both raise many litters together once she old enough. No matter if here or in her forest.”

“I think I must spend winter in her forest. Healing Biggen Helpers say I will have these things,” he pointed to his forelimb and tail casts with his good forepaw, “on until mid-winter. I can no climb until they come off.”

She flicked her tail up and down once. “Yes, I speak to healer Biggen before coming to see you. I thank him for saving you and I understand. It will work out, Brave, my pup.” She groomed him some more in affection.

“You warn me as young pup to no trust Biggens. Or become pup forever.” Brave paused a moment. “It feel that way at first here. Biggens even clean me after I make bad water and leave pellets.”

“You are adult, Brave. You no pup forever. Things change. Biggens save you. Biggens help us remove old Elder and take him far away in banishment. Tomorrow, Biggen squirrel Energy and others will help us with harvest. No all Biggens bad.”

“If tail no held down like foreleg I would flick it up and down. Energy is quick at harvest. He help me for” he held up two claws, “pawspans using his big backpack tool. I fit in it. He gather as much nuts and seeds in that time as would take me,” he held-up five claws, “days to gather on my own.”

Brave’s mother whistled in surprise. “Energy will bring,” she held up five claws, “or” she held up six claws, “other Biggen squirrels with him. If they are all that good, we’ll have plenty of food and the other females can return before first snow.”

“That would be good, Dame.”

She nuzzled him again. “I can no stay long. Those I now Elder to need me and I need to prepare them for tomorrow’s visitors. I know you in good paws here. Heal and grow strong, my pup called Brave.”

A biggen fox entered the room and stood back as Brave’s mother finished her statement. He cleared his throat.

Brave chittered nervously.

“That Biggen healer who save your life, Brave.”

“You no scared, Dame?”

She held-up a forepaw to show it was wet. “I ride here with fisher elder in Biggen flyer. I meet fox healer. Yes, I scared. They biggen predators. Fischer scare me more than fox. Fischer could easily eat me in bite or,” she held up two claws, “bites. They very kind when you speak to them. Biggens no allowed to hunt smart squirrels. When you sniff them you smell no blood. They no hunt at all!”

The fox listened to the translation of this conversation and thanked Pekan for showing him the new translation app. “I would have a bad reputation if I ate my patients, Brave,” he replied with a chuckle. “Up until now I’ve only checked on you while you were asleep as I know I’d scare you. I need you to be awake for some things I must look at. I’ll hold still while you sniff me if you need to. I would give you my name, but it won’t translate to chitterspeak.” After the translation program fell silent, the fox doctor slowly approached and let Brave sniff him.

“He smells like a fox in our forest, right?” Brave’s dame asked him.

“Yes,” Brave replied and then his eyes shot wide. “Much strong scent as I would never get this close to normal fox in our forest.” Brave sniffed some more and his eyes short wide. “But I no smell blood.” He looked up at the doctor. “You no hunt as my dame elder speak?”

“My father taught me to hunt when I was an older pup. But I don’t hunt as I don’t need to. Now, I need you to hold still as I check some of your wounds to see how they’re healing.”

Brave held perfectly still as the doctor removed some of his bandages to check the wounds. His dame gasped briefly at how long some of the gashes were and the lack of fur around the wounds. Brave held still partially because he was asked to and partially because he was too scared to move.

“I assure you, his fur will grow back. We had to shave...” he paused as the translation program asked for a different word, “cut it if off to properly bind his wounds. It may not match when it grows back.” The fox paused a moment. “What I mean is the fur where the wounds are may

point in a different direction from the rest of his fur. But it will grow back.” The fox turned to Brave. “You heal fast, Brave. I can remove the stitches from this one already.”

“Stitches?” The word had translated, but Brave had no idea what stitches were. “What are those?”

The fox doctor thought for a moment to try and explain. “Have you ever nibbled a long blade of grass and then tie a knot in it?”

“Yes.”

“Many of your wounds were long and deep. I had to use a tool like a blade of grass, but much stronger. I poked small holes in your skin to either side of the wound and passed that grass-like tool through the holes and then tied a knot in it tight to hold your wound closed so it could heal.” He held up a mirror so Brave could see the wound in question. “This is one of the smaller wounds and only needed four stitches.” The fox glanced at the flatpanel that paused at the number and instructed him to hold up four claws, which he did.

“What you need me to do?”

“I need you to keep holding still. Your mother can hold your good forepaw in hers while I do this if you want. I know you are an adult. I also know you are scared. It will sting a little as I remove the stitches.” The fox doctor gently snipped the four stitches. He then removed them one at a time with tweezers and applied antiseptic to the tiny holes. Brave winced but did not move. “You live up to your name, Brave.” The fox checked over his other wounds and applied clean bandages, again showing Brave the wounds using a mirror.

Brave chattered in distress. “How I live long enough for you to help me, healing Elder? So many, many long, deep cuts. I no see until now as all covered when I awake.”

“You lost a lot of blood. I wasn’t sure if you would live, to be honest. I’m also glad to learn the one who did this to you has been punished.” The fox finished changing Brave’s bandages.

“Alright, I want you to slowly sit-up.”

“Really? I was told I should no move.”

“That was when you first arrived. While your wounds are still healing, if you move slowly, you won’t reopen them.”

Brave slowly sat-up. The fox pulled a tool from around his neck and stuck two ends of it in his ears. There was a disk-like thing at the other end. “I am going to listen to your heart. This will be a little cold to the touch, but that is all it will feel like to you.” Brave held still while the fox listened to his heart with his stethoscope. “Breathe in slowly...hold your breath a moment...exhale. Excellent!” He pulled the ends of the stethoscope out of his ears and dangled the instrument around his neck again. “I think you’re ready.”

“Ready?”

“Would you like to walk slowly around the room. You will need to put your weight on your good forelimb and not the one in the cast.”

The fox helped him down out of the hammock bed. The fox showed him a backpack-like device. “You will need to wear this.” There was a sling in the back of it. “We’ll need to place your tail in here to hold it in place.” Brave cooperated as the fox helped him into the device and his tail into the sling. “You will need to do this to your tail each time you want to move around the room for now as it still needs to heal. Ready?”

Brave looked to his mother briefly who flicked her tail up and down once in encouragement. He took a hop-leap, landing on his good foreleg. It was a little awkward, especially as he couldn’t use his tail as a counterbalance. And he found he couldn’t keep a straight line without leaping towards his injured side, but he was able to scamper slowly around the room.

“Excellent. The nurses won’t have to help you when you need to urinate or defecate. You can just put on the sling and come over to the room over here on the side on your own.” The fox led him over to the bathroom, which consisted of a trough in the floor. “Straddle the trough, do your business and it’ll flush it away.” He demonstrated for the squirrel, who stared in surprise as a quick stream of water flushed through the trough after the fox made bad water. Brave tried the contraption out and then returned to his hammock.

“When you first arrived, I thought you would be here a month,” the fox paused a moment listening to the instructions from the translation program and flashed all ten claws three times and then five more claws. “You’re healing a lot faster than we expected. I think we’ll be able to let you leave in about a week” the fox held up seven claws “to ten” he held up ten claws “days.”

Brave sat-up in the hammock and bowed to the fox in thanks. He hesitated a moment and then held open his arms. The fox understood and bent forward and gently hugged the small squirrel.

“Your name really does fit you, Brave. I have other patients to tend to.” The fox departed.

“I need to leave, my pup,” he mother said and hugged him. “You will heal as healer promised.” She and Pekan left. Brave felt lonely, but he also felt better than he had just a few pawspans of time before knowing his dame was alive, was the new Elder, and most importantly, she approved of Blossom.

NINETEEN

Saniel and the five other citizen squirrels who joined him met with the forest Elder. Each had a backpack on.

“You speak true how big your backpacks are,” she stated. “Come, let’s see how well you can harvest.”

Saniel and the others followed her up into the canopy. They spread out and began to work, quickly filling the backpacks. She showed them where to empty them. They filled that hollow and several others in a pawspan of time. Her pup hadn’t exaggerated. They were quick and efficient with their backpacks.

Others had gathered near the end of the pawspan of time watching in amazement. When the time was up, Saniel and the others perched on a large branch while the cousin squirrels gathered around their new Elder and spoke quietly to one another. All the tails raised in unison. She came over to them. “How much time can you give?”

Saniel looked at the others. “It’s four clicks until dinner time.”

“We’ll need time to clean-up. Tell her three clicks.” The others agreed.

Saniel turned back to the Elder. “We can help you for three more pawspans.” He held up three claws.

“Good. You’ll split up and help a specific squirrel for” she held up one claw “pawspan. Another squirrel will then find you and again, help them for” one claw held up “pawspan. And again, like that for last pawspan. Then all come back here.”

Saniel and the others nodded. They split off with individual squirrels as instructed. Three clicks flew by rapidly. They returned together as instructed. To their surprise, Schoolmaster Pekan was sitting on the forest floor waiting for them. They gathered around him. As they did so, the Elder arrived as did all the other squirrels. They spoke quietly among themselves. All raised their tails. The Elder came most of the way down the tree.

“Biggen Teaching Elder, these Biggen pups help us much. What they harvest in the last,” she held-up four claws “pawspans of time would have taken us at least” she held-up five claws “days. If they could help us for another full day, all the other females could return now instead of next spring.”

Pekan listened to the translation provided by his flatpanel and nodded. He turned to the six citizen squirrels and praised them. “What do you think? Are you willing to work with them all day tomorrow?”

“Schoolmaster,” Saniel spoke for the others. “We’d love to,” the others nodded, “but we have classes.”

“You will receive excused absences if you are performing community service, which I deem this is.”

None of them hesitated in agreeing to return.

TWENTY

“...and that is how I began my journey to become an Elder.” Elder teacher finished typing and his flatpanel spoke in Biggenspeak for him. He whirled his tail in the air, so proud to have used Biggenspeak writing to tell his story to the pups in the classroom.

“That was wonderful, Elder Teacher,” Butternut praised in Common. “What do you think, pups?”

The pups in the room wigwagged their tails up and down multiple times. Some typed on their flatpanels to have them praise Teacher with “It was wonderful!” or “You brave to speak that.” And many other comments. Butternut allowed them to speak over each other as it showed they were learning Common.

Elder Teacher bowed in thanks. He typed into his flatpanel and it spoke, “Thank you.”

Hidget’s flatpanel vibrated. She looked at Butternut who nodded. Hidget went out into the hallway and answered the call. Her face looked downfallen as she spoke quietly to whomever was at the other end. After the call ended, she made her way back to Butternut.

“We’ve got a problem,” Hidget spoke quietly to Butternut. “Can we end the morning session a little early?”

Butternut looked at her for a moment, nodded and turned to the class. “We’re going to end it there for today. Don’t forget your homework for tomorrow. You each will need to speak a short tale in Biggenspeak.”

“Yeah!”

“Elder Teacher, please stay,” Hidget requested.

After the pups had stacked their seat cushions and departed, Hidget turned to both of them. “Snow Valley Village has filed a complaint with the education board.” She started to repeat it in chitterspeak, but Teacher stopped her, typing on his flatpanel for the practice.

It spoke in Common for him. “I will ask you to repeat in chitterspeak if I do not understand. Please continue. What has upset the elders of the local Biggen colony?”

“They are upset that you have two teachers, Butternut and me. They have been asking for a teacher for years but have never met the minimum ten students needed. They currently have eight.”

Teacher typed into his flatpanel and it spoke in Common. “Let me gather the Elder Council together. We will go speak to the village elders. We’ll offer to share resources.”

“What?”

“It’s just eight Biggen pups, right?” He raised his tail briefly in a curl. “Maybe, you could work them into the classes?”

“Biggens pups learn more slowly than your smart squirrel pups,” Hidget responded.

“I’m sure we can work something out,” Butternut replied.

Teacher flicked his tail up and down once as he continued to type. “We need to keep on good terms with our neighbors. And it would be good for both our and their pups to get to know each other better.”

“Alternatively, we could ask some of our pups to join them so they can get a teacher,” Butternut suggested.

“I’ll need to let the education board know of your proposal.”

Teacher flicked his tail up and down once and departed.

TWENTY-ONE

“Are you sure you want to take that lab?” Saniel asked. “It’s optional.”

“Yes, Saniel, I feel I need to take it. I learned a lot in the virtual dissection lab, but I think I’ll learn more cutting-open an actual body.”

“They use live small rodents, Blossom.”

Blossom drooped her tail. “I know. It’s rare that they receive a cadaver donation. Those usually go to medical schools. I’ll just have to eat it after.”

“That’s your choice, love. I’ve had small rodent a few times when Dad or Mom or I have caught and killed them trying to build nests in our storage rooms. We ate them as we killed them.”

Saniel made a face of distaste. “It bothered me each time, but I understood why it needed to be done. I just hope you don’t regret it.”

“I know, but how am I going to be able to become a doctor if I don’t get my paws dirty digging into an actual body?”

Saniel nodded. “I won’t be around for lunch. I’m helping the local smart squirrels with their fall harvest with permission of Schoolmaster Pekan.”

Blossom hugged Saniel. “That’s so thoughtful of you.”

“Blossom, are you sure you wish to go through with this?” the wolf biology teacher asked. “This lab is usually only taken by predator species.”

“Squirrels are omnivores, Ms. Trenchworth. I feel I need to do this.”

The wolf nodded. “Very well. You will team-up with Stacker,” the wolf pointed to a fox.

Blossom move over by the fox who nodded. “If you find you can’t eat the remains when we’re done dissecting it, I’ll eat it.”

“The rules of my colony are very specific, Stacker. If you kill and it is not in self-defense, you must eat your kill. I will eat what I can. I appreciate the offer of help.”

“My father taught me the same rules when he taught me to hunt. If you kill it, you must eat it.”

Ms. Trenchworth went to the front of the classroom. “Each pair of you will work as a team and retrieve a small rodent from the cage. Once back at your lab desk, you will place the rodent in the provided tube and gas it to kill it. Then you will dissect it, labelling the various organs. Once I’m satisfied with your work, you may eat your kill. Remember that. If you take the life of a cousin creature, you should honor that kill by eating it. Any questions?” She paused a moment. When no questions were asked, she said, “Go to it.”

Stacker grabbed a small rodent and carried it back to the lab table. Blossom held the tube while Stacker placed the struggling rodent in it. Blossom covered the opening with a stopper and hose and turned on the gas. Invisible carbon monoxide filled the tube. They waited for the rodent to stop moving/breathing.

“Please forgive us, little one,” Blossom whispered. “We will learn from you and your body will not go to waste.” She wiped a couple tears away.

Once they were sure the rodent was dead, Stacker removed it from the tube and pinned it down in the tray, torso/belly up.

“He was male,” Stacker stated.

“All the small rodents for this are male,” Ms. Trenchworth stated as she was passing by as she worked her way around the room to check on each student’s progress. “That’s to ensure we don’t kill any unborn young.”

Blossom used a scalpel to carefully cut the rodent open and expose the organs. She and Stacker carefully removed the still warm organs, labeling each one correctly. Blossom was surprised there wasn’t more blood than there was. Ms. Trenchworth nodded at the correct labeling as she passed by again. Blossom then carefully split open one of the rear legs to look at the muscle structure. She repeated the process on one of the fore legs.

“What are you doing?” Ms. Trenchworth asked.

“Some extra personal study, Ms. Trenchworth. While we were to just identify the internal organs, I thought as it has died for us to learn, I could also look at and learn of how its muscle structure works prior to us eating the remains.” Blossom pointed out and identified each muscle group in the lower leg to Ms. Trenchworth.

“Very good. You two are done. Excellent work.”

Blossom cut off the rear leg she had cut open and nibbled on the raw meat. Her nose wrinkled in disgust and she found it difficult to fight back the tears that she had been mostly holding back.

“Maybe you’d prefer it cooked,” Stacker suggested as he lit a small lab burner. He started to roast the other rear leg, fur and all holding it over the flame with tweezers. The fur singed off and the skin crackled as the meat sizzled in the flame.

Blossom’s nose began to twitch. The leg Stacker was roasting smelled familiar. She mimicked him using another set of tweezers. Yes, that smell was familiar, but she couldn’t quite place it. When the fox pulled his rodent leg off the burner, Blossom followed suit. She nibbled at it again. This time, it was tolerable. The meat had a slightly nutty flavor to it. Her eyes shot wide.

“It tastes like the sausage slices at Jochen’s!” she blurted out. “Except those are plant-based.”

Stacker giggled. “Not necessarily. They offer both plant-based and meat-based sausage slices. And small rodents are plentiful and a nuisance if not culled often. Grind-up the meat and they make a good sausage.” He ate all of the leg he had cooked, bone and all, which crunched loudly. She stared at him and fought down the fear that was screaming at her to flee. Her tail wigwagged nervously. He shrugged. “My digestive track can handle small bones as I learned when my father taught me to hunt.” When Blossom finished picking off all the meat of the leg bone she had cooked, Stacker offered to eat the bone. She let him. Her tail continued to wigwag nervously. It didn’t help that she could hear bones cracking throughout the lab.

They cooked the forelegs the same way and ate those.

“Do you think you’ve eaten enough to meet the rules of your colony, Blossom?” Stacker asked.

“Yes, I think so. Also, I don’t think I could eat much more anyway.”

“Then do you mind if I eat the rest so it doesn’t go to waste?”

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once. “Yes, go ahead. Thank you.”

Stacker gobbled the rest of the remains in one bite.

“I need to leave. Do you mind finishing the clean-up?”

“No, not at all. You were a good lab partner. Thank you.”

Blossom bolted out the nearest exit and raced up the nearest tree crying out in fear. She had barely kept it together in the lab. All those predators crunching on bones near her. Her instincts cried out at her to flee and she barely kept it together long enough to see that her rodent was completely consumed. Once she calmed down a bit, she curled up on the branch and began to weep over what she had done. She had learned a lot but was the price worth it as Sanial had warned her? And she realized she liked the taste of the cooked rodent meat and that bothered her even more.

She wasn’t sure how long she lay there curled-up weeping when she felt the branch she was on wiggle. Someone else was coming. She opened her eyes and looked up at the new Elder and sat up.

“My pup’s potential mate, Blossom, what’s wrong? Others hear you cry-out and I come to see why.”

“Elder, is hard explain. Is hard being both smart squirrel and small Biggen. Today I in class where all others were Biggen predators.”

“You are my pup’s potential mate, Blossom. You may call me Dame if you wish. I see how that would be hard. I have all I can do to no flee from your Biggen Teaching Elder, the fisher, when I must speak to him.”

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once and then explained as best she could what happened in the lab. She broke down crying at the end. To her surprise, Brave’s mother pulled her into a loving hug and let her cry herself out. Brave’s mother gently stroked her back fur much as her own mother would do.

“Is very difficult thing you learn today, Blossom.”

“I killed a small rodent.”

“And you ate your kill as required by rules of your forest and ours.”

“Biggen Fox helped me.”

“That’s alright. You ate what you could. And I think you will no do that again any time soon, right?”

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once. “Yes, I will no kill again if I can help it.”

“Then you learn a lot today. Go, before Biggen Teaching Elder worry you missing. I also need to return to guide the Biggen squirrels helping us with the harvest.”

“Thank you, second Dame,” Blossom replied, hugging her one more time before climbing down and returning to the school.

The Elder smiled as she watched Blossom race back into the Biggen learning place. She would make a good, caring mate for her pup.

TWENTY-TWO

Blossom returned to the lab to find all the other students were long gone. Ms. Trenchworth was at her desk. She looked up.

“Welcome back, Blossom. Are you alright now?”

Blossom grabbed her tail to keep it under control. “Yes, Ms. Trenchworth. I just felt I needed to come back and apologize.”

“Your lab partner cleaned-up and everyone in the class understood why soon after you left abruptly.”

“Really?”

The wolf pointed to the open window facing the forest.

“I keep one open in case a student gets sick. They all heard your cry of distress. I watched the other squirrel come by and comfort you. Again, are you really alright?”

“I am now. My instincts are closer to the surface, then they are for citizen species, Ms. Trenchworth. All the crunching of small rodent bones by my lab mates triggered my fear instinct. I needed to flee and climb and cry out a warning. The squirrel you saw is the local elder. She comforted me and we talked it out. Yes, I really am fine now. I’m willing to come back after a different lab and help clean-up.”

The wolf nodded. “That’s alright. No need to do that. You did pass the lab. The school has a counselor if you find later on you need more assistance.”

“Thank you, Ms. Trenchworth.” Blossom bowed and left.

Blossom pushed the cart with her lunch on it from the serving line into the cafeteria. It had been provided for her after that first meal so she didn’t have to rely on others to carry her tray for her. She had less on it than usual. She was still a little full from eating the two limbs of the small rodent that morning.

“Hey, Blossom! Come join us!”

Blossom looked towards Stacker the fox. He was at a round table with another fox, a pine marten, and a dog. She realized the others had been in the lab.

“Are you sure?” Blossom asked as she wheeled her cart over to their table, which was set at a comfortable height for them.

“Please,” Stacker replied as the other three nodded. The female dog’s tail wagged as she offered to lower the table.

“No, leave it at a height that is comfortable for you,” she responded as she moved the tray off the cart, lifted the cushion that was larger than her and heaved it up onto the cart. She pushed the cart next to the table, locked the wheels, and scrambled up. The cart and cushion put her at a proper height at the table.

Introductions were made around the table. The other fox was Stacker’s twin sister, Jezzie. The male pine marten was Grenar, and the female dog was Lorraine.

“You left the lab in a hurry,” Stacker said. “I was concerned.”

“Especially when you and the others heard me cry out as I climbed the nearest tree?”

Stacker bowed his head for a moment. “Well, yes.”

“It was all the bones crunching around me. Instinct cried out, ‘Flee before you get eaten next!’.”

“So, it wasn’t that you were sickened after you ate what you could of our lab specimen?”

Blossome wigwagged her tail left to right and back once. “No.” She drooped her tail. “I actually liked the taste of cooked small rodent. Thank you for suggesting it. But I know I won’t directly kill another anytime soon.” She pointed to the three small sausage slices on her plate. “I’m going to determine if that was a one-off or if I really do like the taste.” She nibbled on one and nodded. “Yes, I think I actually like that.”

“Until you came into the lab this morning, I didn’t know squirrels ate anything other than seeds and nuts,” Jizzie said. “I didn’t know you also ate meat.”

“We don’t normally do so, unless there aren’t a lot of other choices. After all, you need to take a life to have meat.” She poked at the other two sausage slices. “Someone had to kill some small rodents for these to be available in the serving line. I understand they are a nuisance here in the city as Stacker explained to me at the start of the lab. I will eat all I took out of respect of those who lost their lives so I could try it.”

She spent the rest of the meal explaining what life was like for a cousin squirrel. The others knew little of it. She loudly bit open a butternut and nibbled on the nut within and explained how her incisors continuously grew.

“They continuously grow?” Lorraine asked.

Blossom nodded while flicking her tail up and down once. “Just like most other cousin rodents’ teeth. I need to constantly gnaw hard things to ensure they remain the proper length.”

“My father taught me you claim a territory and defend it from all other squirrels,” Grenar said.

“That’s the case in many forests including the one here next to the school. But that’s not the case for my home forest.” She gave a brief history of The Refuge and they were amazed.

The lunch period flew by. They thanked her for educating them on cousin squirrels.

TWENTY-THREE

“Will you be coming home for a brief visit with us, Sanial?”

“No, Blossom. Moselyn’s claws are long enough for her to start learning how to climb, so I’m going to teach her here.”

“Our trees are bigger. You could teach her there.”

Saniel scuffed a paw and looked down a moment grasping his tail in his forepaws. “She’s asked me to sleep alone with her while you’re away.”

Blossom grabbed his forepaws and nuzzled him. “I hope the two of you sleep well.”

“You’re not jealous?”

She gigglechittered. “As long as you’re not jealous that I’ll be doing the same with Brave the next couple of days.” She scuffed a rear paw herself. “She was smitten with you the first time you nearly bumped into each other. I’ve encouraged her.”

Saniel’s eyes widened. “And you did that before Brave made his first moves.”

She nodded. “You said to our parents you would share me when the time comes so I could raise a family. Shouldn’t that go both ways?” She raised her tail briefly in a curl.

Saniel flicked his tail up and down once and hugged her. “You’re so thoughtful, Blossom. But it still feels like I’m cheating on you. So, it really doesn’t bother you?”

She flicked her tail left to right and back once. “Of course not. I really like her and I wouldn’t mind having her as a mate-sister. I hope it works-out.”

He hugged her more tightly. “Thank you. Say hi to my folks for me.”

“I will.”

Blossom arrived at the hospital and made her way to Brave’s room. Something was much different this time. The casts on his left foreleg and tail were smaller. The tail one held it up over his body if he was on his stomach. As he sat up, it continued to hold it up so it wouldn’t drag on the floor.

“Biggen Healer changed these, um,” (sighchitter) “No word in chitterspeak for them.”

“In Biggenspeak, the thing holding your broken leg and tail together to heal is called a,” She switched to Common for the next week, “cast.” She drooped her tail. “I no know of a word for it in chitterspeak.”

“Yes, these things,” he pointed to them with his good forepaw. “Biggen healer changed them. If I am careful, I can climb short distances with this new thing. And I can carefully move the end of my tail.” He twitched it slightly.

“That’s wonderful.”

“He cut and remove last of,” he sighed. “I no remember the word. It is in chitterspeak, but I no hear it before healer speak it. Biggen tool hold my wounds closed. Loops like grass with knots but stronger.”

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once. “I understand. Biggen words are ‘medical thread’ tied in knots. Also called stitches.”

Brave flicked his tail up and down once. “Yes that is what healer called them. He cut and removed the last of them.”

The fox doctor entered. Brave held his paws open and the fox accepted a hug.

“He good fox Biggen,” Brave said.

The fox turned to Blossom. “I take it Brave has filled you in. He heals quicker than most of my patients I’ve had in the past. So much so, I was able to change out his casts for lighter/stronger models. If you’re here to transport him, he’s ready to leave. The cost has been covered by your colony.”

Blossom bowed to the fox and read his name tag on his medical smock. “Thank you, Doctor Roxle. Come on, Brave. He said you can leave.”

Brave hesitated. “I can no climb far, how am I to get to the treetops in your forest?”

“I’ll fly you up to the entrance in the Biggen flyer we will take.”

“I saw you and your sire get in one last summer. They are big tool. Tree could no support one.”

Blossom gigglechittered. “Our trees very big. It will no be problem. Come.”

Brave was amazed at how fast they flew in the hovercraft. “We fly faster than predator birds!”

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once. “Yes, but even at this speed it will be close to two handspands to get to The Refuge.”

After Brave watched the world literally fly by for a while, he curled-up and napped. Blossom joined him. A trilling noise awoke them, scaring Brave a bit. Blossom explained it was an alarm she set to ensure they would be awake before they arrived. She went over to the command panel and typed in a change in their course. Brave stared at the huge trees as the hovercraft began to slow down and rise into the sky. It came to a stop on a huge branch on one of those trees and the doorway opened. Brave’s home nest tree was only slightly smaller in diameter than this one branch.

“I told you that you wouldn’t need to climb. After you get out, I need to bring the flyer down to the ground before I can send it on its way. It won’t take me long to climb back up and join you.”

Brave got out and watched as Blossom rode the flyer down to the forest floor far below. True to her word, she got out and was quickly back up by his side as the flyer flew back the way it had come.

“Welcome to your home away from home, Brave,” she led him towards a round door in the tree. “Actually, this is new for me too, so I may be just as surprised. They were still working on this tree home when I left for Biggen school. If it is anything like the one Energy’s family lives in, it’ll be a combination of Biggen and smart squirrel things” She pointed down with her tail to the strange structure on the forest floor leading from the base of the tree back towards the local Biggen village. “And I have no idea what that is about. It was no there when I leave for Biggen school at harvest time. I will ask.” She touched the door and it opened. “Hello?” she called out.

An excited chittering echoed from the inside and she was nearly barreled over by her mother. They hugged and sniffed.

“Dame, this is Brave, my second potential mate.” She then looked at Brave. “This is my dame, Pinecone, she is one of the Elders here.”

Pinecone and Brave sniffed each other. “I hear alot about you, Brave. Welcome.” She pulled him into a warm embrace.

“Dame, what is that structure on the forest floor leading from the base of our tree?”

“That long story, Blossom. Local Biggen village no have teacher. Our Council of Elders met with theirs. We are allowing their pups to attend our school. What you see down there will be a tunnel from here to the village so after snow falls their pups may still come here.”

“So, after buried in snow it will be like woodchuck tunnel?”

“Something like that. Biggens very busy last seven days building those. Just in time. I think first snow will come very soon. I smell snow in air at sunrise. Come, I show you around our combined Biggen/smart squirrel nest home.”

Pinecone lead them into the tree home and Brave stared around. It was much larger than he expected and there were many Biggen tools. He froze as a Biggen raccoon rounded the corner from a different room. Blossom bounded right up to the raccoon and hugged him. The raccoon then scooted down trying to make himself look smaller.

“Come sniff, no be afraid, you no bite, I no bite,” the raccoon spoke in perfect chitterspeak.

Brave nervously approached him and sniffed him. To his surprise the raccoon’s fur smelled strongly of smart squirrel.

“Brave, this is Curious, he mate to Butternut, our Biggen things schoolteacher. She is trying to convince my sire to be her second mate.”

“Because I can no give her pups and she want pups,” Raoul added. “It long tale why I and smart squirrel are mates. There will be plenty of time later for I and she speak it to you. I show you your nest space.”

He led them to a stairwell. Brave stared at the strange to him steps.

“This Biggen tool for Biggens who no can climb up and down like squirrels. I can climb a little but no as good as squirrels.” He pointed to Brave’s cast. “And I think you can no climb much with that on, right?”

Brave sighchittered. “No.” The tip of his tail wigwagged left to right and back.

The raccoon nodded. “Well, these go all the way to the ground inside the tree. So you no trapped up here while you heal.” Raoul led them up to the next level and down a short tunnel to a room. “Blossom’s sire and dame build a nest for you. As you spend long time at healer place, you know about trough to leave bad water and pellets in?”

“Yes,” Brave answered as the tip of his tail flicked up and down once. It felt strange to him to have the bottom half of his tail restrained, but at least he didn’t have to concentrate on not letting it wigwag anymore.

Raoul showed him the bathroom next to the nesting space. “Is same here. I leave you two be.” The raccoon walked upright back down the tunnel to the stairwell.

Brave nervously chittered. “He nearly as big as fox healer.”

“Curious is harmless. As you will learn later, he thinks he is a squirrel trapped in Biggen raccoon body.”

They inspected the nest.

“Is very big.”

“I think my dame and sire think Energy was coming home to visit with us.”

“Yes. I mean no just the nest. This tree. Is very big.”

“Trees here very old. Is why they so big.”

“I think all squirrels in my home forest could live in this one tree.”

“Well, come winter, there will be many squirrels in here sharing warmth when the storms come.”

Brave's stomach grumbled making Blossom gigglechitter. "Come, let's go find where the food storage is."

TWENTY-FOUR

Moselyn wigwagged her tail nervously. She had allowed herself to give into the urge to wigwag her tail more thanks to Blossom. It was strongly discouraged in her family. It was so much easier to just let it happen than to try and control it as her parents expected.

"Are you sure?" She asked Saniel.

"Yes, the best way to learn to climb is to just do it. I will teach you just as my mother and father taught me. We will take it slow and easy at first. I'll show you what I want you to do." He lifted one rear leg and twisted his foot around 180 degrees and back a couple times and then did likewise with the other. "Your turn."

"Really?" She lifted one rear leg and twisted her foot around like him. It was a bit stiff, but she was able to do it. "I don't believe it!" She did likewise with the other rear foot.

"You've never done that before, have you?"

"I've never had a reason to. Maybe I did it when I was a young child and probably got scolded for it. My parents believe, 'We're above cousin squirrels and should not act like them.'" She stuck out her tongue briefly to show what she thought of that.

"So, learning to climb would upset them?"

"Yes, and they would have a fit to see that I've let my claws grow out. And you know what? I don't care. They'd be upset with me wigwagging my tail too. Blossom and I have been roommates for a little over a month. It's like she's opened my eyes to how much I've missed out on."

"Alright, do you know why I wanted you to twist your feet back and forth a few times like that?"

Moselyn shook her head in the negative.

"It's to loosen up your ankles so that you can climb back down after climbing up."

"Huh?"

"We can turn our ankles around that far so that when we climb a tree, we can face downward when we climb down." Saniel demonstrated, going up the tree trunk two mits, turning around

and coming most of the way back down. He pointed at his rear paws with his tail as they pointed upward. “Your rear paws will hold you up on the descent.” He let go of the trunk with both front paws and dangled there a moment. “See.” He grabbed back on and finished the descent. “I want you to try climbing, but don’t go as high as me. Go up maybe as high as you are tall, then turn around and pause a moment.”

“Okay.” Moselyn expressed surprise at how easy it was to climb the trunk using her claws. Her claws ached a little bit. She turned around and to her surprise, she was able to hold on to the trunk with all four paws facing downward. Her head was half her body length from the ground.

“Excellent. Now, I want you to do like I did and slowly let go of the trunk with your front handpaws. Let your feet hold you in place.”

Moselyn’s tail wigwagged nervously. “What if I lose my grip?”

“Why do you think I asked you to not climb too high? If you feel yourself slipping. Let go and tuck into a ball as you fall.”

Moselyn closed her eyes for a moment and forced her breathing to slow down. She then opened her eyes and let go of the trunk with her handpaws. To her amazement, she remained in place, dangling from her rear paws. Again, there was a small ache.

“Good. Now grab the tree again with your handpaws. Carefully scoot down your rear paws a little, then your front. Then your back, and so on until you’re on the ground again.”

She followed his directions and made it safely back to the ground and stood up. She then hugged him. “I did it!” She exclaimed.

“Yes, that was an excellent first try,” Saniel replied as she released him. “How are your paws and claws feeling?”

“I’m feeling a little bit of an ache from my claws.”

“Really? Let me take a look.” Saniel gently took her left handpaw in his and wiggled one claw at a time. “Does that ache or hurt as I try to wiggle them?”

“No.”

He hooked one of his claws into one of hers and gentle tugged.

“That aches a little,” she replied.

Saniel drooped his tail. “That’s not good. Probably because you’ve never climbed before. It shouldn’t ache unless you’ve been hanging for a long time. Do you want to climb some more or hold off?”

“Let’s try a little more.”

“Alright, follow me. We’ll go up and down a short distance. Then a little higher and higher. The more you practice, the easier it will become for you. I’m going to check on you each time we return to the ground. I want the truth. If your claws ache more than they do now, we should quit for the day.”

She nodded and followed him up two mits and back down.

“They ache the same.”

They repeated the process adding height to each trip. Several trips later, Saniel paused on a branch 12 mits up and Moselyn joined him. She looked down and almost felt dizzy.

“How are your claws?”

“They’re starting to ache a little more. I’m also starting to feel some aching in my legs and arms.”

“Then this is probably enough climbing for one day. The muscle ache is probably because you’re not used to climbing.”

She shook a little as she scooted back on the branch and into him. “I think we’ve climbed a little too high this time.”

He reached around her and held her for a moment from behind. “A squirrel afraid of heights?” He gigglechattered. “We’ll rest here for a few ceclicks and then descend. If you need a break on the trip down, remember, your claws will hold you in place. Do you want me to lead again?”

“Yes, please.”

“Just let me know when you’re ready.”

She leaned into him just enjoying the cuddle for a few ceclicks. She then indicated she was ready. Saniel took it slowly, leading her down the trunk. They both got down safely. She complained again about her claws and Saniel drooped his tail.

“I hope it’s simply because you have never climbed before. But I think we should take you to see the nurse just to make sure.”

She quickly hugged him, pecking him on the cheek. “Thank you, Saniel, for teaching me today. Let’s go see the nurse.”

TWENTY-FIVE

The short time Brave had with Blossom at The Refuge seemed like a blur. All the squirrels he met were friendly. The evening after their arrival, Brave had mixed feelings as he prepared to nest down for the night because he knew Blossom needed to return to the Biggen learning place in the morning. They had discussed that during the day. He had agreed he would be better off healing here rather than return with her and nest with her among all those Biggens.

Blossom bounded in carrying two of the small Biggen viewers on her back. She set one aside and then presented the other to Brave. He nervously wigwagged the portion of his tail not constrained by the cast as he hesitated to touch the Biggen tool.

“My sire got this for you, Brave,” she said as she held it out for him. “This way after I go back to Biggen learning place, we can talk to each other before sunset if you wish.” She pointed to the camera on the front of the device. “This tool work like an eye and ear. It will see and hear what you point it at.”

Brave stopped her. “I see one before, Blossom. Your sire used one with me in healing place. Eldest Elder speak to me through it. We speak a long time about my dame’s sire. Is very special Biggen tool.”

Blossom nodded. “Good. I was no sure how you would react to it. As you understand, I show you how it work. We call Energy,” she said and tapped a symbol on the pad. After a moment, Saniel and Moselyn appeared on screen.

“Hello?” Saniel spoke in Common. There was a brief pause and he switched to chitterspeak. “Oh, Blossom and Brave! I no recognize symbol identity.” He repeated what he had said in Common for Moselyn. “She no know much chitterspeak. You and I will need to teach her.”

Moselyn waved from behind Saniel.

“She did well on her first climbing lesson yesterday.”

“But my claws started aching,” Moselyn added. “I saw the nurse. It’s normal for someone who hasn’t climbed before. She said I need to give it a couple days rest before I try again.”

“That’s wonderful, Moselyn,” Blossom replied. She then repeated the conversation in chitterspeak for Brave. She continued in chitterspeak. “This new Biggen viewer sire got for Brave. I show him how it works. I will be back to school before midday tomorrow.”

“Wonderful! See you then!”

Just before Saniel could cut the connection, Moselyn nuzzled his cheek startling him, but in a good way based on the smile that appeared on his muzzle before the image went dark. Blossom gigglechattered.

Brave continued to wigwag the tip of his tail nervously. “Energy with another female.”

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once. “Yes. I share Biggen learning place nest space with Biggen squirrel,” she switched to Common for the next word. “Moselyn.” She sighchittered. “Her name no translate to chitterspeak. Energy agree to share me with you, so I agree to share Energy with her. He can no sire pups with me.”

Brave’s eyes widened. “Yes, so he told me the day he helped me harvest nuts for the winter.”

“So, I hoping she wins him over so when the time comes, he may sire pups.”

Brave’s tail tip flicked up and down once. “She,” he hesitated a moment, “she have nice fur pattern. I no see squirrel with fur like that before.”

Blossom nodded. “Yes, I no see any squirrel like her before either. She is a nice Biggen. I hope it work for the two of them.” She showed him how to turn the flatpanel on and off and pointed out three icons in the lower left corner. “The blue one will call me. The green one will call Energy.”

“What is the orange one?” Brave asked.

“As an Elder, your dame has a Biggen viewer. Press the orange one to call her.”

“Really?”

“Go ahead. Try it.”

Brave carefully tapped the orange icon. There was a pause and there was his dame on the screen. Her muzzle lit up when she saw him.

“Brave, my pup!” She greeted wigwagging her tail in excitement.

“I arrive safe at The Refuge, Dame. Blossom’s sire give me Biggen Viewer. Blossom teaching me how to use it.” Brave beckoned Blossom to get next to him. They nuzzled each other on the neck.

“Brave is settling in, Second Dame. He will be safe here as he heals. I return to Biggen learning place tomorrow.”

Brave’s dame nodded. “Is good. I happy you continue to heal, Brave, and will see third winter soon. Blossom, thank you,” she bowed, “again for helping save my pup’s life. When the time comes, may you two raise many pups together. I need to end call. I very tired. Was very busy day today.”

The screen went dark. Brave followed the steps Blossom had shown him and powered down the flatpanel. He carefully set it to one side outside of the nest.

They snuggled down in the nest.

“I will thank your sire when I see him. Is good tool. Very special gift. He very kind.” He nuzzled her again on the neck.

Both were quickly asleep.

TWENTY-SIX

“Hello Brave,” Raoul greeted the injured squirrel as he set a bowl of hot cereal down on the low table off the kitchen. Brave was sitting on a cushion nibbling on an assortment of butternuts, seeds, and acorns.

Brave bowed to the raccoon. He was still getting used to how different things were in this huge tree two days after Blossom had returned to the Biggen learning place. He liked the soft sitting cushions. On the other paw, he was surprised to learn that Biggen teeth didn’t continuously grow like his own and that’s why they needed to cook their food, making it soft. He had tried a little of Raoul’s breakfast the previous day. He didn’t like it as it was too soft and mushy.

“Are you bored with staying in this tree?” Raoul asked between mouthfuls of cereal.

Brave flicked the tip of his tail up and down once. “Yes, but I can no climb much with this,” he raised his cast covered forelimb briefly. “I can climb Biggen path to ground, but then what?”

“You have no gone outside the way you came in and looked around?”

Brave’s tail tip wigwagged left to right and back again.

“After we done eating, I show you something.”

Eating nuts always took longer than it took the Biggen raccoon to eat his food. Raoul patiently waited for him.

“Come.”

Raoul led him out the main entrance onto the huge branch. It was so wide the raccoon could easily walk on it. He scooted down on all four paws much to Brave’s surprise.

“Is safer if I keep all four paws and claws on the branch, Brave. Is long way to ground. If I fall I might die. Look around.”

Brave did so. He stared in amazement at all the huge trees around them.

“I can no control my tail like you, Brave. I must point with my paw instead. Look over that way,” Raoul pointed with his left handpaw along the left side of the tree. “Do you think you could climb around to that other branch with that,” he switched to Common for the next word, “cast?”

Brave flicked his tail tip up and down once. It wasn’t more than his body length-and-a-half around to the other branch. He could have easily jumped the distance without the cast. He watched Raoul work his way around the tree using his claws. He could see the raccoon had to concentrate while doing it. He followed once Raoul was safely on the other branch.

“No tell my mate I do that. She get upset.” He pitched his voice a little higher. “You no squirrel. You no risk fall climbing like squirrel!” He did a good imitation of a gigglechitter. “I no climb as good as a squirrel, but I climb for many years.” He pointed along the branch. “Look that way, Brave.”

Brave looked along the branch. There was a crossing branch to the next tree low and close enough to this branch that they could cross without needing to jump. His eyes widened.

“It is like that among many of the trees here at this level. I can cross easily and travel through the canopy like a squirrel. Even with your cast, you can too. I could lead you, or I can find another squirrel to go with you, help you learn your way around, and help you find your way back. You no need stay trapped in our nest tree.”

“Curious, you really are squirrel trapped in Biggen raccoon body.” He bowed to the large raccoon. “Lead the way.”

Raoul smiled at the compliment and led Brave on a tour through the forest along easy to cross branches.

“...Curious then led me around the forest through the canopy. I no need climb or leap from branch to branch at level he lead me on.”

“That’s wonderful, Brave. I so worried you would get bored in nest tree.”

“After so long in healing place, I ready for change. I fought down fear and hug Curious to thank him when we return.”

“I’m sure it made him very happy.”

“It did. As he lead me around, I meet other squirrels I no meet when you here and all friendly to me.” Brave fell silent a moment. When he continued there was a bit of awe in the tone of his

voice. “Including Eldest Elder. He insist I call him Elder or Teacher, but no call him Eldest Elder.”

“Teacher no like use Eldest Elder title except when must.”

Brave nodded on the screen as his tail tip flicked up and down once. “He invite me to Elder things,” he hesitated as he struggled with the next new-to-him word, “class starting tomorrow. I will start to learn from him, Elder Tassel, Elder Foxy, and your Dame.”

“That’s wonderful. Is rule our forest, any who wish may learn Elder things.”

“Elder Teacher explain to me why. Your dame’s dame very wise.” Brave scuffed a rear paw. “And is something to do.”

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once. “Yes, my granddame very wise make that rule.” She yawned covering her mouth with her tail tip. “Sorry. I need to go sleep soon. I glad you are finding things to do at The Refuge.”

Brave flicked his tail tip up and down once, waved and ended the call.

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 chittered 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."

TWENTY-EIGHT

Moselyn twitched an ear in her sleep. Something tickled it a second time and then lightly nuzzled the back of her head.

"Wake-up, Moselyn," Sanial spoke quietly.

Moselyn stirred and opened her eyes. She looked at Sanial and Blossom and slowly sat up.

"You were on my tail again," Blossom stated as she leapt out of the nest and headed for the door. Sanial snuggled down again behind her.

Moselyn laid back down and started to drift back to sleep. She then suddenly snapped awake grabbing her flatpanel and glancing at the time. "It's a class day! Why did we sleep in? We're late to class!"

"Look out the window," Saniei stated. "Then check your school messages."

Moselyn looked out the window in wonder. It, apparently, snowed heavily overnight. There were many students out in the snow throwing it at each other. She checked her messages and her eyes shot wide as Saniei watched her.

"Apparently, it is a school tradition to cancel classes after the first snowstorm. Something that goes back to a long time ago when most students had to travel here from home every day to attend. We let you sleep as long as we could. Blossom needed to use the bathroom. And somehow, you just keep rolling on top of her tail as we sleep." Saniei giggled briefly.

Blossom returned and looked out the window. "It looks like most of our fellow students are out there."

"Then perhaps we should go join them," Saniei replied as he stretched, briefly nuzzled Moselyn, and got out of the nest. "Some cold air will do us good." Saniei left the room.

Moselyn stretched. "Part of me just wants the two of you to come back into this nest rather than go out in the snow. But I know that's not going to happen." She got out of the nest, stretched again, and opened the door as Saniei returned. She pecked him on the cheek. "I'll be right back."

Saniei picked up a small brush and brushed Blossom's back. She stretched out and chattered through the attention. "If you haven't done so yet, I suppose I'll need to teach Brave this, huh?" he asked.

She flicked her tail up and down once.

As he put the brush back in its spot on a table, Moselyn returned. "I'm ready."

The three of them made their way outdoors. Blossom paused just outside the door under the roof covering the entrance. She tentatively poked her left forepaw in the snow just past the entryway. It felt cold and wet. She shook it and giggled.

Moselyn stared at her a moment before it occurred to her. She blurted out her thoughts. "Oh! This is your first-time experiencing snow!"

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once. "Yes, I was born midway through last winter. It was a few weeks after that before my eyes opened and my fur grew in. I didn't venture out of the nest until several weeks after that. By then the last of the snow had melted and spring had arrived." She suddenly leapt up and outward, arching like a fox and landed in the snow muzzle-first. Most of her body sunk in the snow with only her tail showing out of the hole. It vanished in the hole and she poked her head out and shook the snow off it, giggling. "It's cold, but I like it."

Where she sat, the snow was up to her neck. “I can see why we’re not supposed to go out in this alone back home. We would be easy targets for predators.” Her tail wigwagged back and forth. “I can’t imagine how much they got back home.”

Saniel nodded. “As The Refuge is two klicks north of here by hovercraft, and higher in elevation, the snow always tends to be fluffier and deeper than this.” He gathered a small amount in his paws and shaped it into a loose snowball. It was slightly sticky, just enough to hold together. “Last winter we got a lot of snow. It was nearly up to the entrance of my family’s nest tree.” He gently tossed it at Moselyn, who anticipated it coming and dodged it.

It took a moment for Saniel’s snow depth statement to sink in, but Moselyn quickly forgot about it as she returned fire. Soon, they were throwing snow back and forth at each other, not always succeeding at dodging. Blossom avoided more than them by simply ducking back down in the latest hole/depression she made in the snow as she had to leap up and forward and sink back down to move about in what was to her deep snow. Being smaller than them, her snowballs were, likewise, smaller, and she couldn’t throw them as far, the three of them laughing as they threw snow at each other.

They rounded the corner where the other students were. They were immediately pelted with snowballs from the others. They returned fire as best as they could, but seemed to be getting hit more than they could hit others. It was slow moving about in the slightly sticky snow that was up just past Moselyn and Saniel’s knees standing up on their hind legs. Poor Blossom remained up to her neck whenever she landed from a leap. She used the depressions she created in the snow and the two others as shields from the onslaught.

The snowballs flew back and forth for about a klick before those who had been out in the snow and cold the longest started to make their way back to the school entrance. Eventually, Blossom, Saniel, and Moselyn followed them, brushing the snow out of their fur as best as they could before returning inside. They still needed to towel down as what was left in their fur melted. The unique scent of damp fur permeated the building.

TWENTY-NINE

Butternut looked across the classroom as the morning session of cousin/smart squirrels gathered cushions and sat down. They were joined by eight citizen students from the nearby village, two beavers, two rabbits, a woodchuck, a skunk, and two squirrels. They were well behaved and knew to quickly quiet down once they took their seats. They also knew if they didn’t follow the rules, they’d go back to learning strictly by video. None of them wanted that. All eight of them were quickly doing better in the in-person environment. Butternut nodded in satisfaction and glanced at Hidget who also nodded slightly. Elder Teacher arrived and wigwagged his tail in apology for being slightly late as he grabbed a cushion and sat down among the students.

“Thank you for arriving on time,” Butternut began, causing Teacher to droop his tail slightly.

A tail shot-up. Butternut paused and looked at the student. “What is it, Tansy?”

The female squirrel quickly typed away on her flatpanel and it spoke her words in Common, as it was required that only Common be used in the classroom. “Ms. Butternut, this may not be the best time to ask about time. But that’s what I’d like to know. We smart squirrels measure time in pawspans. Citizens, including our friends from Snow Valley,” she nodded to the students from the neighboring village, “measure time in clicks. Why is it called a click?” She curled her tail briefly as the device finished her question.

Butternut smiled as she again glanced at Hidget. “That might make for a good warm-up lesson for today. Tansy, would you explain why smart squirrels call it a pawspan?”

Tansy typed away again as her panel spoke for her. “If you hold your forepaw sideways out in front of you as far as you can with your fingers stretched-out,” she demonstrated, “the sun covers that distance of your four outstretched fingers in the sky in the time Citizens call a click.”

“Excellent,” Butternut responded. She turned to the eight biggens/citizen students. “Do any of you know why it’s called a click?” They all looked at each other and shrugged. One of the rabbits raised his right paw. Butternut pointed to him. “Go ahead, Tupper.”

“I don’t know,” Tupper looked at the others from the village as he drooped his ears slightly. “It’s never occurred to any of us to ask. We just accept it’s called a click.”

Butternut nodded. “That’s a reasonable answer.” She looked toward Hidget. “Mentor Hidget, do you know why we call our basic unit of time measurement, a click?”

“I’m embarrassed to admit I don’t. Like Tupper and the others from the village, it never occurred to me to ask when I was growing up.”

Butternut gigglechittered for a moment. “Me neither.” The confession caused a small gasp among the smart squirrel students. “So, let’s find out together! That’s one of the great things about having the world network at our clawtips through our flatpanels.” She pulled hers off her fur where it was hanging and quickly tapped away.

Soon, the larger panel on the wall lit up. The lights dimmed a bit in the room. Text appeared on the screen and was also read aloud. “This video lesson is approved by the World Education Board for all age levels.”

A group of citizen children of mixed species appear on screen at the edge of a playground with one adult fox among them. “Now remember, have fun playing, but you need to return in one click.” The children cheer and run off. The fox turns to the camera. “OH! Hello there!” He waves. “Today, we’re going to learn about time. What exactly is a click and why do we call our basic measurement of time that? A click is how we measure time.” The fox fades from the screen and continues to narrate the lesson as a space view of the Earth fills the screen. “Our planet, Earth, orbits around the sun. As it does so, it rotates creating day and night. One full day and night is twenty-five clicks in length. The Earth takes three-hundred and fifty point four days to

orbit the sun, which is what we call a year. That extra zero-point-four days? That's why we add an additional day to the year every few years to keep our year on track."

A clock dial appears on the screen with one through twenty-five on it. "A klick, itself, is divided into one hundred segments called ceklicks." The screen zooms in on the segment between 1 and 2 with a hundred tickmarks in between with each tenth mark a little darker. And ceklicks are again divided into one hundred segments called miclicks." The image is replaced by the fox again. "Why ce and mi?" The fox shrugs a little. "Ce and mi are derived from a now long-dead language and stand for one hundredth, that's zero point zero one and a thousandth, that's zero point zero zero one respectively." 0.01 and 0.001 appear as text below the fox's muzzle. The fox blinked his eyes. "That eye blink? That's roughly 1 miklick."

The fox turns and walks towards a table on the edge of the playground. "Now how was it we came-up with the word klick for measuring time?" He chuckles briefly. "Well, to get there, we need to look back a very long time ago to the edge of recorded history, roughly ten thousand years ago, when citizen species first tried to measure time using some means other than holding ones' paw straight out sideways." The fox demonstrated the very same thing Tansy had at the start of class. "It turns out that the speed the Earth rotates can be measured doing that. It takes one klick for the sun to travel the distance of your fingers on one paw held sideways as far out from your body as you can reach."

The camera pans out slightly to show some devices on the table. The fox points to a circle with numbers on it with a thin tall cylinder in the center. "At first there was the sun dial. Useful during the day, as long as it wasn't a cloudy day. Early citizens noted how shadows change throughout the day and marked up that progress on the sundial." The camera pans to the next instrument, a standard hourglass. "Then, once the art of glassblowing was perfected, someone created a sand timer out of glass. As you can see it's large at both ends and turns into a funnel in between. Thanks to gravity, sand passes through the funnel at a set rate. With some tweaking, they created one that would pour all the sand from one end to the other in one klick of time. If you flip it at the end of that klick and again and again, you'll find you flip it twenty-five times in a day."

"Now, early citizens had an accurate way to measure time!" The fox gestured with his arms excitedly and 'accidentally' knocks the hourglass on its side. "Oops. Well, at least if you don't knock it over." The camera pans a little further over the table to another sandglass. This one is mounted in a secure frame. "And accidents like mine just now led to the invention of a secure chamber for the sandglass." He tugs at the chamber that is securely bolted to the table. No matter how hard he tries, it doesn't budge. "Good, this time, I can't knock it over and that's the point. In this case when it's time to turn it over you need to pull a spring-loaded pin to release the secured glass so it can be flipped," the fox demonstrated, pulling on a pin, turning the glass over and releasing the pin, which made an audible click as it snaps back into place. The foxes ears twitch. "Did you hear that? No? Listen carefully as I turn it again." He again pulls the pin, flips the glass and releases the pin, which makes an audible click as it snaps back in place. "Yes, there it is! A clicking sound!" He looks straight at the camera as he again pulls the pin and releases it several times resulting in the clicking sound over and over. "And that may seem silly to you, but that is

how our basic unit of time measurement became known as a klick. It's due to the sound made when turning over a secured sandglass."

The camera pans over to a wind-up clock. "People got so use to that clicking sound that when the first mechanical clocks were created, they were designed to make that same sound at the top of every klick." The mechanical time piece clicks loudly on cue. "The invention of the mechanical clock was an advantage over the sandglass, as you only needed to wind the main spring once per day on the clock versus needing to flip a sandglass every klick."

The camera pans back to the fox. "Everyone had their own local time zone up until after the last war," the fox visibly shudders, "some four hundred years ago. This caused confusion as people tried to coordinate between all these different time zones for various things. As the world grew more united after the last war, it was decided to have a single, universal time. Now, everyone's clocks, usually in the corner of their flatpanel read the same worldwide. Of course, that is if you use your flatpanel as your time piece and not an antique mechanical clock and have forgotten to wind it up." The fox grinned.

The screen begins to fade. "I hope you found this lesson useful. Have a wonderful day!" The fox waves as he fades out and credits appear on the screen. The large panel darkens as the lights brighten in the room.

Butternut looked around the room. "Thank you for that question, Tansy. We all learned something new." Butternut bowed slightly in the smart squirrel way for thanks. "Now back to our plans of study for today..."

THIRTY

Blossom entered her room and found Moselyn in her hammock curled-up and sobbing. Blossom went straight over to her. "What's wrong, Moselyn?"

Moselyn looked up at her roommate with tear-filled eyes. "My parents..." she sobbed some more. "They are more upset then I expected over my learning to climb. I can only go home for Winter Solstice break if I cut my claws and promise not to climb again."

Blossom's tail lashed about as she pulled her flatpanel off her fur and called-up the parental agreement for attending the senior school. She scrolled through it, paused and held the panel where Moselyn could see the screen.

By applying our pawscan to this agreement, we, the parents of this student, grant shared guardianship of our young adult child with the teaching body of Rock City Senior School.

Blossom scrolled further down.

By applying our pawscan to this agreement, we understand that our young adult child may explore other lifestyles and will not interfere in that exploration, trusting that the teaching body of Rock City Senior School will keep our young adult child safe in that exploration.

Her tail continue to lash about in her anger as she asked Moselyn, “Did your parents fail to read the school agreement before accepting it?”

Moselyn sniffled. “If they did, I don’t think they care.” She fell silent for a moment.

There was a scratching at the door and then Saniel entered as both Moselyn and Blossom had reprogrammed the door to grant him automatic access. He still gave warning before entering by scratching lightly, per custom. He saw Moselyn’s distressed look and concern filled his muzzle.

“What’s wrong?”

Both of them filled him in on what had happened. Now Saniel’s tail thrashed about.

Saniel took Moselyn’s forepaws into his. “I’m going to call my mother. I want you to speak to her.”

Moselyn hesitated briefly. “How will that help?”

“Trust me in this.”

She nodded slightly. “Okay.”

Saniel placed the call through his flatpanel. It didn’t take long for Carulin to answer.

“Saniel! This is an unusual time for you to call. Is there something wrong?” There was motherly concern in the tone of her voice.

Saniel turned around his flatpanel so the camera would allow his mother to see Blossom and Moselyn.

“Yes, but not for me. I can’t wait to be home for Winter Solstice break in three weeks. I’m in Blossom’s room with her roommate, Moselyn. Moselyn, this is my mom, Carulin.”

They exchanged greetings.

“We’ve been three-way dating, Mom. Moselyn has grown-out her claws and I’ve been teaching her how to climb.”

Carulin smiled. “What do you think of climbing, Moselyn?”

Moselyn hesitated a moment. “My claws ached the first time and I was a bit scared and a bit dizzy once we were twelve mits up. I’ve gotten good at it and the school counts it as physical ed. As to what I think of it? I’m not really sure yet.” She paused a moment and glanced at Saniel. “I’ve been learning it in order to impress Saniel.”

“Twelve mits on your first try?” Carulin responded with her tail showing briefly on screen behind her. “Wow! I couldn’t do half that height when Jessopha, my husband and Saniel’s father, started teaching me to climb. You’re much braver than I was on your first try.”

“Mom, Moselyn needs to talk to you.” Saniel lowered his voice. “Her parents are acting like your parents I never met.”

Carulin’s eyes narrowed and her tone became very serious. “Transfer this call to her flatpanel and then I want you and Blossom to give us some privacy.”

Moselyn wigwagged her tail nervously as she pulled her flatpanel off her fur so Saniel could transfer the call.

“You’ll be fine,” Saniel reassured her as he tucked his flatpanel back onto her fur. Blossom gave her a reassuring paw squeeze and followed Saniel out of the room.

“Start from the beginning, Moselyn,” Carulin encouraged after she heard the door close.

Saniel and Blossom spent time studying in his room. Drexle was slightly startled when he came in 50 ceclicks later not expecting to see his roommate in their room as he seemed to spend most of his time in Blossom’s and Moselyn’s including most nights.

“Welcome home, stranger,” Drexle joked at him. “Hello Blossom. Roommate issue?”

“Parent trouble,” both of them said in near unison.

“Moselyn needs some privacy,” Blossom added.

Drexle nodded as he got into his hammock. He got comfortable on his stomach, pulled out his flatpanel, and like them started studying.

Another 50 ceclicks went by. Saniel’s panel chirped indicating an incoming call. He quickly answered.

“Hi, Mom. I’m in my room with my roommate, Drexle, and Blossom. What’s up? Do you need this to be private?”

“No need to ask them to leave. Briefly, Moselyn might be coming home with you and Blossom at the end of the semester. I’ve already reached out briefly to Schoolmaster Pekan. Moselyn

should be on her way to meet with him right now. She can fill you in as she wishes after that meeting.”

“Understood. Thank you, Mom. Love you!”

“Love you too, hun. Gotta go. The Schoolmaster is calling me back, probably to discuss my offer in more detail with Moselyn.” Carulin ended the call.

Drexle whistled. “That level of serious parent problems, huh?”

Both the squirrels drooped their tails. “You could say that. Her folks are upset she’s learned to climb.”

“What?! But that’s what your species is great at! I’ll admit I’m a bit jealous. I’m not a bad climber myself going up, but it’s slow going climbing back down backwards as I can’t turn my feet backwards like you.”

“Even so, they’re threatening to not let her come home unless she immediately stops.”

“But that’s in violation of the school agreement.”

Saniel and Blossom nodded.

Drexle drooped his tail. “Thank you for sharing. I promise I won’t discuss the issue with her unless she offers to share first.”

THIRTY-ONE

Moselyn, Saniel, Blossom, Drexle, and Hersah, as a group decided to go have pizza at Jochen’s that evening, something they did every couple of weeks. While they waited for their meal, Moselyn discussed her parent problems with the rest, her closest friends.

“May I talk about what your mother told me, Saniel, in front of you? She said I could speak about it in front of others, but I wasn’t sure how you’d feel about that.”

He reached over and squeezed her paw reassuringly. “About her parents, right? Of course. Would you feel more comfortable if I give an overview first.”

“Please.”

He turned to the others. “My mother had serious parent problems too, while attending our senior school. Like Moselyn’s folks, they disapproved of her growing her claws out and learning to

climb. They barred her from coming home until she trimmed her claws and ceased ‘acting like a feral cousin’.” Sanial paused a moment and then continued. “She never went home again. Dad’s folks took her in during school breaks. Grammie and Grandpie didn’t climb, but they supported Dad’s choice to learn. By her third year here, Mom had to cut herself off from any communications with her folks as every time prior to that when she tried to reach out to them all they would do is harp about her needing to trim her claws. I’ve never met them.” He paused again. “It is also why I don’t have a family name. She dropped it when she cut ties with her parents. As it is tradition among squirrels for the male to adopt the female’s family name upon marriage, Dad dropped his family name in support of her and with the approval of Grammie and Grandpie. Mom told him he didn’t need to, but she appreciated that he did so.”

Drexle and Hersah gasped in shock. Blossom already knew and didn’t react.

“It worked out for Dad and Mom. Grammie’s father passed and his will included an interesting twist in it. Among his possessions was the butternut tree forest we now live in. The will stated it would go to whichever of his descendants was ready to live in that forest to tend to the trees.”

“That part I wasn’t aware of,” Blossom piped in. “I never knew how they got that forest.”

“Thank you, Sanial,” Moselyn replied. “Your mother went into a lot of detail about the trauma she experienced to try and reassure me that she knows what I’m feeling. She has offered to take me in as your father’s folks took her in. Apparently, Schoolmaster Pekan is older than I thought. He was schoolmaster even back then. He still remembers what she went through and appreciates her offer. If I accept the offer, I’ll be required to keep a journal and write a report on my observation and experiences of cousin squirrel lifestyle.”

Hersah blinked her eyes a few times. “Wait? Cousin squirrel lifestyle? Is that in reference to the parental agreement? I thought that clause was just for exploring gay/bi/trans lifestyles.”

“So did I,” Moselyn replied. “But it also applies to ‘cousin’ lifestyles. Say a fox student hasn’t been taught how to hunt. They would be taken off to some remote forest and taught to hunt. They would then spend time out there surviving by hunting. Upon returning they need to write a report on it just as I’ll be required to do if I choose to go to The Refuge.” She sighed. “I love my parents. So, I’m torn between obeying them or risking never seeing them again.”

Blossom and Sanial each reached over and touched one of her paws. They glanced at each other trying to figure out who should speak their thoughts. Finally, Sanial broke the silence.

“You will always have our respect regardless of what you decide, Moselyn.”

Before they could say more, their pizza was brought to their table. Blossom’s slices had small rodent sausage slices on them. No one asked her about it knowing why she tended to order that on hers.

THIRTY-TWO

Brave arrived in Jessophat's and Carulin's nest tree a clawspan early for that day's Elder lesson. Tassel arrived soon afterward. She tapped an icon on her small flatpanel and Brave's mother, Hope, appeared on the larger flatpanel on the wall. The other two elders were to her left and right.

All three on screen wigwagged their tails in greeting. Hope, turned to the one on her left nodding to her.

"Greetings, Elder Tassel and Brave. I chose name. I am Grace."

The other one now leaned forward. "And I chose name. I am Charity."

Tassel and Brave bowed to them. "Is good names," Tassel replied. Brave flicked his tail up and down once in agreement.

"What we learn today?" Hope asked as her tail raised briefly in a curl on screen.

"We wait," Tassel replied. "More Elders to join us."

As she finished stating this, the larger screen split into smaller segments as the squirrel elders of the other three forests near Rock City appeared in the other segments.

Hope's, Grace's, and Charity's eyes briefly grew big enough to see their iris colors, brown, blue and brown in surprise at who had joined them. All three of them wigwagged their tails nervously.

"Has a Grand Council been called?" Hope squeaked with fear in her voice as her muzzle filled the whole screen briefly.

Tassel wigwagged her tail in the negative. "No," she reassured Hope. "These other Elders were invited to join in on this lesson." She glanced over her shoulder as Jessophat entered the room from the hallway. "Today's lesson is no normal Elder lesson. It will be taught by Elder Kind."

Jessophat bowed to the squirrels on screen and to Tassel and Kind. "I am humbled to be asked to speak to you as I am no smart squirrel."

"We see you, your mate, and pup, as more big smart squirrels than biggen squirrels, Elder Kind," Tassel replied. "Who better explain about Biggens than you?"

Jessophat flicked his tail up and down once. "I will speak best I can. Biggens complicated. I know you are here because you live near Biggens," he gestured on screen, "or with us." He nodded to Tassel and Brave. "As you live near or with us, you need better understand us."

Jessophat spent the next two clicks/pawspans of time giving an overview of how Biggens were different from smart squirrels and how they lived compared to smart squirrels. The others in attendance had many questions, including a few from Tassel and Brave. Those that listened were amazed at what Jessophat spoke about from reproduction, which he hesitated on a bit, explaining Biggens kept that private for some reason, to how they traded food/goods for other food/goods. All those on screen were shocked to learn Biggen squirrel front teeth did not continuously grow like smart squirrels and that Biggen skunks could not spray like cousin ones could. He answered all he could and promised to follow up with answers to the few he could not answer.

When he finished, those on screen bowed in thanks.

“You give us much to think on, Elder Kind. I see why smart squirrels in your forest make you Elder though you Biggen,” one of the Elders from the forest north of Rock City stated. “You show the patience an Elder needs as we asked you many questions.”

The others agreed. One by one, the other groups ended the calls at their end until it was just Jessophat, Tassel, and Brave in the room and Hope, Charity, and Grace on screen.

Tassel turned to Jessophat and offered to hug him, which he did.

“Thank you, Kind. I now have another lesson to teach these others. You welcome to stay.”

Jessophat drooped his tail. “I cannot. I have other things I must do to support our colony, Tassel.”

She nodded and turned back to the screen and glanced at Brave. “I know what Kind speak on is a lot to think on already. My lesson will be short.”

THIRTY-THREE

“...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 not 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.

THIRTY-FOUR

Brave learned about Aldin's past on the flight. He was amazed as he never imagined there were other worlds out there. Aldin also taught him the name of the fox doctor after Brave asked him. The snow started to pick up in intensity as they neared Rock City.

"We may be early, but better than not making it at all," Aldin commented in Common as the hovercraft settled into the snow outside of the hospital.

Brave simply nodded and followed Aldin as quickly as he could through the snow and into the Biggen structure. Their empty hovercraft raced off as they approached the entrance. Inside the entry way, they both shook off the snow. Brave stuck close to Aldin as he led the younger squirrel over to an otter behind a table. He was scared because of all the Biggens. As Aldin showed no fear other than faint pawprints, Brave assumed it was safe, but that did little to help his fear.

"May I help you?" the otter asked.

Brave nervously wigwagged his tailtip as he pulled his flatpanel off his fur and typed and it read his text for him. "I am Brave from The Refuge. I have an appointment with Dr. Roxle."

The otter glanced at his flatpanel scrolling through it. "You're a bit early."

"We wanted to beat the snowstorm," Brave's flatpanel spoke for him.

The otter raised an eyebrow. "It's snowing again?"

Brave typed away. "You should see how much it has snowed at The Refuge. It's deeper than you are tall!"

The otter smiled at the comment as he tapped an icon on his flatpanel. "You're checked in. Please make yourself comfortable. You might be waiting a while since you're early."

Aldin led Brave over to a sitting cushion against a wall. The younger squirrel curled up on it. Aldin chitterspoke to him in a low voice. "I choose this spot next to wall so we no need to watch in all directions. We safe here, but I know instinct screams otherwise."

Brave nodded again as Aldin curled-up on a cushion next to him. Biggens came and went, but they kept a respectful distance from the two cousin squirrels. Nearly a klick went by as both snoozed a bit. Brave's name was called in chitterspeak by a male biggen squirrel nurse, startling him from his nap. He led Brave and Aldin into a room.

“My name no translate into chitterspeak,” the nurse spoke drooping his tail.

Brave pulled up his flatpanel. “I begin learn biggenspeak, nurse. I can try and type-speak your name.”

The nurse’s face lit-up. “I am Muralan”

“Mue-ran-all” Brave typed and looked hopefully at the nurse as the flatpanel spoke the word.

The nurse smiled. “Close enough on your first try. I need to take your vital signs. Oh, sorry. Chitterspeak.” Muralan switched to chitterspeak. “I need check how warm you are and how well your blood flow in body.”

Brave held still while the biggen wrapped a device around his right forelimb.

“This feel tight briefly. Is alright.” Muralan checked Brave’s blood pressure and nodded at the numbers. “Normal. Is good.” He then pointed another tool at the underside spot where Brave’s forelimb met his torso. It beeped. Muralan looked at the number and nodded. “Normal. Come we go other room.”

Muralan switched to Common and addressed Aldin. “Embassador, I don’t know how to explain we need to take x-rays of his left forelimb and tail.”

“Show him to explain. I’ll explain the best that I can.”

Brave understood part of the conversation and patiently waited. Aldin turned to him and used mostly chitterspeak except for the nurse’s name. “Muralan is taking us to a special Biggen tool the looks inside your body to see your bones. They want to see how your forelimb and tail are healing.”

Brave nodded followed where he was led leaving wet paw prints as they went. Deep down he remained very scared, but as Aldin still showed no fear, he assumed he was safe despite the fear. There was a table in the room he was led into.

“Get up on table, sprawl out like when you try cool off on very hot summer day. Lay still until I speak you may move.” Muralan instructed in chitterspeak. “Table cold. I sorry.” Muralan drooped his tail. “This no take long.”

Brave climbed up onto the table and lay on his stomach, splooting. It was cold to the touch. He tried not to shiver. Muralan pointed a biggen tool hanging from the ceiling close to his left forelimb. He and Aldin slipped behind an alcove with a window in it. There was a brief hum. Muralan came back around and pointed the tool close to Brave’s tail. He retreated back into the alcove. There was another brief hum. He returned, lifted the device out of the way and indicated Brave could get off the table.

“You like your name. Very Brave. Come we go back to other room and wait for Dr. Roxle.”

Twenty ceclicks went by before the Biggen fox entered the room looking down at his flatpanel.

Brave's face lit up as he quickly typed away on his flatpanel and it read his text. "Hello Dr. Roxle. I start learn biggenspeak. I can no thank you enough for saving my life."

The fox was slightly startled, but smiled slightly remembering he shouldn't show many teeth to the small squirrel. "You are welcome, Brave. I will still run the translation program on my flatpanel." His flatpanel repeated the words in chitterspeak. "I want to listen to your heart with my um..." he paused a moment knowing there would be no chitterspeak word for stethoscope. "My heart listen tool here." He pointed to it. "If you want, after I let you listen to your heart too."

Brave sat up and held still for the fox. He was scared, but again, knew the fox healer would not hunt him. The device was cold against his fur just like last time.

"You're heart is racing a little. I'm scaring you, aren't I?"

"A little," Brave typed. "I know you no threat, but you still fox and cousin foxes hunt my kind. Instinct is telling me to flee."

Dr. Roxle nodded. "If there is something I can do to help calm the fear inside, let me know." He showed Brave how to use the stethoscope. Brave listened first to the biggen fox's heart than his own.

"Yours beat slower than mine," Brave typed.

"Smaller animals have faster heart rates." Dr. Roxle replied as he draped the stethoscope back over his neck and pulled his flatpanel off his hip. "I have something to show you." He tapped an icon on his flatpanel and the room darkened slightly as a larger flatpanel lit up on the wall. On the flatpanel were two x-rays. One showing a forelimb with a broken bone and one showing a forelimb with no broken bone. "The one on the left is how your forelimb looked when you first arrived here nearly dead last fall. On the right is how it looks now." The images changed to show how his tail had healed. "This means we can take the current casts off."

Brave's muzzle and eyes lit up with joy.

"However," Dr. Roxle continued as he brought the first set of images back up. "See here," he pointed to the healed bone where there was one spot slightly darkened. "You will need to wear a slip-on brace-cast on your forelimb for another 10 to 14 days." He started to flash his claws.

Brave replied in chitterspeak. "I know count words and understand number of days that is." He paused as the translation program repeated what he had said in Common. He then typed into his flatpanel. "What is a slip-on brace-cast?"

"It is a cast that you can put on and take-off as needed. You won't need to wear it at night when you sleep, but you should wear it whenever you are awake. If you aren't moving about you can

take it off again until you're ready to move about again. As long as you remember to wear it when needed for the next 10 to 14 days, you won't need to see me again."

Muranal returned after having ducked out briefly. He wheeled in a tray with tools on it.

"What I need to use to cut off the cast will be noisy as you know from last time. You'll need to stay perfectly still again. Put your flatpanel away. If you have questions we'll rely on the translation program. Lie on this table like you did for the x-ray." He paused a moment as the translation program asked for a different word for the term x-ray. "Bone image taker," he tried. The translation program accepted that.

Brave did as he was told getting up on the table and splooting spread-eagle on it. It was cold like the other table, but not quite as cold and this one had a little more padding. He remained perfectly still as the fox used a tool that whined at a near uncomfortable pitch and cut off the cast on his forelimb. He then did the same for Brave's tail.

"Sit-up." Brave did so. "Slowly wigwag your tail."

Brave did so and smiled. "I can move my tail again!" he chattered excitedly.

The fox nodded. "It's not perfectly straight."

"I no care! I still have it thanks to you."

Dr. Roxle nodded. "You're welcome. Now hold-out your left forelimb." Brave did so. The fox gently took hold of it with both of his forepaws. He bent it at the joint this way and that way gently asking if anything hurt as he did so. Brave wigwagged his tail left to right in the negative each time and chitterspoke no.

Dr. Roxle then showed Brave the slip-on cast. It had two separate sections with a joint in between which would let him move his forelimb about more naturally."

"I had something similar for a while," Aldin stated trying to provide encouragement.

Once Brave showed he could put it on and take it off himself a few times, the fox asked him to scamper around the room. Brave easily did so. He felt joy and elation. If it weren't for the slight pressure where the cast pinched against his fur, he wouldn't have noticed he had it on at all.

Dr. Roxle pointed to the rough textured wall. "Try a little climbing."

Brave quickly scurried up the wall, turned around and came back down. He came straight back to the fox and opened his arms. Dr. Roxle understood the gesture, scooted down and hugged the small squirrel.

"Thank you!" Brave chattered.

THIRTY-FIVE

It was only half-handspan/half a klick until sunset based on the clock on Aldin's flatpanel as he and Brave left the hospital. It was snowing steadily.

"We'll need to hurry to get a room for the night."

"A Biggen room?" Brave chittered while raising his newly freed tail into a slightly crooked curl briefly. "No need. Is winter, my Dame, Hope, will make room for us."

"Are you sure?"

Brave pulled his flatpanel off his back, pressed the icon that connected to his mother's flatpanel. It wasn't long before she was on the screen.

"My pup, Brave! Is late, I sleep soon."

"Dame Hope. Elder Voice Friend and I are at Biggen healing place. Look!" He raised his left forelimb up so it would be seen by the camera. And then he wigwagged his tail."

Hope's face lit up. "Is good!"

"Yes, is good. We no have time to return to The Refuge. Dark soon."

"Come. You two nest with us tonight. There are others here. Will be warm."

Aldin leaned in. "Is alright, Elder Hope? I no wish intrude."

"Sire of my pup's future mate is always welcome in Learn Forest."

"Learn Forest?" Brave asked.

"Our forest is near Biggen learning place and Biggens come here to learn about the forest. All who live here speak on this decide to give our forest name."

"Name make sense," Brave replied.

"We will arrive at sunset," Aldin added. "Well, if it no snowing at time sun would set."

Hope shared acorns, hazelnuts, and seeds with her visitors. There were three others in Hope's tree hollow. As she warned it was a little tight, but that was good as more bodies meant more warmth against the winter cold. The forest's two other Elders Grace and Charity were there. Brave recognized the other, a male, whose territory was adjacent to his.

"Is good to see you live," he greeted Brave. "Unlike Elders, I no choose name yet. Is strange idea to me. It make sense in time of truce."

"I no choose name Brave. Given name by Biggen squirrel, Energy."

"So, I have explained to him," Hope responded gently nuzzling the male.

Brave looked back and forth between them.

Hope flicked her tail up and down once. "Yes, we nest together since harvest time. I might choose him as my new mate."

"If you do, may the two of you have many pups I may call my littermates," Brave responded.

The six soon snuggled down in a jumble in the bottom of the hollow. None of them were chilled through the snowy night.

Schoolmaster Pekan met Blossom at his office door.

"Please come in," he ushered her in. "You have a visitor."

Blossom's eyes lit up as she saw her father. She bounded over and hugged him tightly.

"There's still a few weeks left in the school term, Father. Why are you here?"

"I was passing through and..."

Brave popped up from behind Pekan's desk.

Blossom chattered in excitement as she bounded over to him and hugged him too. She pulled back and looked more closely.

"Your casts are gone. That's wonderful! I can hardly see the bend in your tail." She realized she blurted that in Common and began to repeat it in chitterspeak.

Brave remained quiet as he smiled at her and nodded while flicking his tail up and down once. He pulled his flatpanel off his back and started typing and it spoke for him, surprising her further. "Raoul teaching me hear Biggenspeak and Biggenspeak writing so flatpanel may speak

for me. I am happy to see you, Blossom. I know you can no...not stay long. Schoolmaster Pekan and Second Father explain you must study for learning tests. Dr. Roxle speak I must wear this,” he pointed to the brace with his tail, “brace-cast thing another nine to ten-and-three days. I then all healed!”

She embraced him in another tight hug. “Second Father?” Her tail lifted briefly in a curl behind her.

“Your sire, Elder Voice Friend, insist I call him sire,” he chittered. “Much like my dame insist you do so with her.” He typed some more. “Switch back to Biggenspeak. Good practice. I can no wait.” He drooped his tail. “Not wait for you to come home with Sanial.”

“I can’t wait either, Brave. Thank you for stopping by.” She hugged him a third time and briefly nuzzled his neck. She turned to her father. “Thank you for bringing him by, Father.”

“Do you think he would let me bring him home without stopping by?” Aldin gigglechittered.

Brave’s tail wigwagged in the negative as he shook his head no out of habit after not being able to wigwag his tail for a whole season.

THIRTY-SIX

The hovercraft quietly settled into the soft snow. Two citizen squirrels and a cousin squirrel stepped out with small backpacks. All three sank a little in the snow. One of the two larger squirrels quietly watched as the hovercraft rose in the air and raced off in the direction they had come from.

“Well, I guess I’m committed to this now,” Moselyn mumbled under her breath.

Sanial nudged her gently. “You were awfully quiet on the trip here, Moselyn. Having second thoughts?”

She drooped her tail. “Some, but I’m here now.”

Blossom grabbed Moselyn’s right forepaw and gently tugged pointing up the nearest tree with her tail. “Come on,” she urged her friend. She turned, leapt at the tree, and started climbing. Moselyn stared up at the huge butternut tree having never seen any tree as large as it before. She glanced at Sanial who nodded in encouragement. She began to climb, though more slowly than Blossom. Sanial held back to keep pace with Moselyn. It didn’t take long to reach the entrance to Sanial’s home.

“Mom! Dad! We’re home!” He called out as he opened the door and let the other two in before him.

Moselyn looked around not knowing what to expect other than they were roughly 13 mits above the snow up in a tree. And it was a huge tree. She again marveled at that, having never seen a tree so large in diameter before. She gasped at the interior inside the entrance. It looked very similar to her own home. She half expected her parents to round the corner when Saniel’s did. She also expected it to look more primitive, like maybe a smaller space with a nest in it like the one Saniel and Butternut had built in her and Butternut’s room at the school.

Introductions were made. Both Jessophat and Carulin hugged her warmly. Carulin then stood back a moment and looked her up and down. “You look different from how you looked in our video call last month.”

“My winter pelt has grown in. It’s greyer than my summer one, Ms. Carulin.”

“Carulin, please. You look just as lovely even with the season color change. After Saniel shows you around and you settle in, would you please help me with dinner?”

“Of course.”

Butternut tilted her head this way and that as she stared at Carulin. Her tail wigwagged slowly.

“You can tell?” Carulin asked.

“It shows just a little,” Butternut replied. “May he or she be healthy.

“More like they,” Carulin replied.

“They?” Saniel asked as he looked at his mother.

She smiled broadly. “After many years of trying, I’m pregnant. You’ll be an older brother come early spring. Dr. Neroff says its twins.”

Saniel hugged his mother tightly. “I’m so happy for you and Dad!”

She scuffed a foot paw. “We tried to time it this way on purpose so that if it worked as it did...”

“So, they would be born at about the same time as this coming season’s smart squirrel pups, right?” Saniel finished.

“Yes.”

“Congratulations,” Butternut said. She turned to Saniel and hugged him briefly. “I’ll catch up in a little bit, Saniel. I’m going to check in with my parents.” She turned to Moselyn. “It’ll be alright, you’ll see.” She darted out.

Saniel showed her around the living spaces within the tree.

“Where does that lead?” She asked, pointing to a door in one corner.

“Down to a few levels of storage in the tree and then down on the ground floor we have a guest room with another bathroom. It’s way down there because not all our visitors have claws and can climb vertically like we can. We have a rope ladder we can extend all the way down to help those who need the assistance.”

She nodded as Saniel led her to the bedrooms and indicated which room was his. She noted he had both a nest and a hammock.

“I haven’t used the hammock-bed in a few years. I have held onto it just in case.”

“Where am I staying?” She asked.

Saniel was surprised by the question. “Well, with Butternut, Brave, and me, of course. I’m sure we’ll split time between here and her parents’ nest tree.”

She nuzzled him. “I was hoping to just be with you.”

“We’re off-grid here, Moselyn. We’re too far from the nearest village, Snow Valley. We have solar with battery back-up. You’ll appreciate the extra bodies for warmth at night and during storms. We don’t have unlimited power here.”

Her eyes went wide. “You don’t have heat?”

“Only what is exhausted by the refrigerator or produced while cooking. This tree keeps above freezing, but during some of the storms, you can see your breath in here. Before we and the local smart squirrels joined up to create The Refuge, there were a few winters where we had to sleep down in the guest room.”

“But heat rises,” she replied.

Saniel nodded. “Yes. However, snow is an excellent insulator. Right now, the bottom of this tree is already under two mits of snow. You get three or four people down there sharing body heat and you won’t notice there is no electric heat.”

“Wait. So, you have slept with your folks in the winter?”

“Up until last winter, yes. Last winter we shared space here with the two dozen or so surviving smart squirrels. I spent nights with my folks and nights snuggled among the smart squirrels. There were nights where we all slept in one fluffy mass in one of the storage rooms that had been given to them.” He walked over to a small bureau and opened a drawer. “We have extra blankets if you prefer, but trust me, snuggling down with a few others works so much better than just a

blanket or two. Look how well you've slept since you allowed me to join you and Butternut in your room at school."

Moselyn nodded. "Yes, I guess I have a lot to learn here."

"Well, you will receive school credit for it," Saniel agreed. "You can leave your backpack in here with mine for now as I don't know which tree we're sleeping in tonight."

THIRTY-SEVEN

Moselyn and Saniel joined his mother in the small kitchen.

"Saniel, you may help with dishes after the meal. Please go peak in on your smart squirrel friends."

Saniel nodded understanding his mother wanted alone time with Moselyn.

After he left, Carulin turned to Moselyn. "How much do you know about helping in the kitchen?"

Moselyn pulled a chef's knife out of the block it was stored in. She inspected the edge, nodded. She pulled a cutting board from those leaning in a rack. She set it on the counter and started dicing an onion. She went slowly at first and soon picked up speed.

"This is the first time I've attempted this with grown-out claws. Carulin."

Carulin relaxed. "Good, I was worried you need to learn some kitchen skills." She handed the younger squirrel more vegetables to dice-up. "And I bet you're having second thoughts coming here."

Moselyn nearly nicked a finger with her knife as she physically tensed up. She paused and gave Carulin her full attention. The older squirrel drooped her tail.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't distract you when you're handling a sharp object."

"Yes, I've had second thoughts."

"So didn't I back then. Extra school credit is just an excuse to allow you to be here." She left 'with Saniel' unspoken. "Remember that. Spending the Solstice break here helps you to better understand yourself and possibly what you really want. However, if you find it's too much for you, there's nothing stopping you from deciding to go home. It won't affect your grades per my conversation with your schoolmaster."

“They won’t let me come home...”

“Unless you trim your claws and stop acting like a cousin squirrel,” she finished for her. “I’m well aware as we discussed through video call several weeks ago, Moselyn. I just want you to know I won’t judge you if you find this isn’t the life you wish to pursue. If you find you need to talk, I’m here. I think you’ll find any adult here will listen to you. Same with the smart squirrels, both the youth and adults.”

Tears suddenly came unbidden to Moselyn’s eyes. She set the knife down, buried her muzzle in her forepaws, and started to bawl. Carulin scooped her up in a hug and let the young adult cry into her shoulder. Carulin slowly rocked her back and forth gently stroking her back with her left forepaw.

“Shh...there, there. Let it out,” Carulin spoke quietly. “I know what you’re going through, Moselyn. I’ve been there myself. Cry as long as you need.”

THIRTY-EIGHT

It was close to dinner time as Moselyn stepped outside a moment to take in the stillness of the forest she found herself in and to gather her thoughts. She didn’t have long to contemplate things as Sanieel soon returned with both Blossom and Brave following as the three of them leapt onto the same large branch Moselyn had been sitting on. Brave froze when he saw Moselyn, staring at her. He snapped out of it after a moment and nervously approached her. He bowed to her and pulled his flatpanel off his back. He typed, “Blossom speak you do no...not understand Chitterspeak. I still learn Biggenspeak. Do my best for you, Moselyn. May I sniff you? It will help me be less afraid.”

Moselyn replied, “Yes, of course. You’re Brave, right? The squirrel Blossom helped in the hospital?”

Brave flicked his tail up and down once as he tucked his flatpanel onto his back, approached her, and sniffed her over. He got a bit closer than she expected as she felt his nose brush her fur quite a bit. He then pulled back from her and typed away. “Thank you, Moselyn. I,” he hesitated a moment as he glanced at Blossom and started again. “I no have the words in Biggenspeak.” He switched to chitterspeak and uttered a series of chits, chats, and chirs that made no sense to her. He then slightly curled around and hid his muzzle in his tail in embarrassment.

Blossom’s eyes widened briefly at what she heard. She nuzzled him in reassurance. “Is ok,” she chattered quietly to him. “Is big change for both you and her.” She then turned to Moselyn and paraphrased what Brave had said. “Brave is embarrassed in admitting he finds you beautiful with your unusual fur pattern. He wished you were a smart squirrel like us as it would make it a lot easier for him. He would gladly accept you as another potential mate then. He’s not so sure about having a biggen as a second potential mate, despite how beautiful you are in both appearance and

scent. Part of his embarrassment is that he admitted that in front of me. I've reassured him it's alright."

Moselyn stared at her and then at Brave. "Potential mate?"

"It's the term smart squirrels use for boyfriend/girlfriend as it can lead to becoming mates among our kind," Blossom responded. "As I'm both Brave's and Sanial's girlfriend, and you are also Sanial's girlfriend, he's assuming you'll be trying to win him over as your second boyfriend."

Moselyn stared at her briefly while letting what she stated sink in. This concept was new to her. She was aware of the idea of multiple partners, but never dreamed she might wind up in one herself. Getting to date Sanial at the same time as he dated Blossom, yes, but it never occurred to her she'd wind-up with a second boyfriend. She then moved over to Brave who continued to hide his muzzle in his tail. She looked to Sanial and Blossom briefly, who nodded encouragement. She then gently nuzzled Brave's side to get his attention. He looked up at her, with his muzzle still half-hidden, his eyes so wide she could see he had brown eyes. "This is all new to me, too, Brave," she responded. "I will not force you to become my boyfriend. I'm happy to just be Sanial's." She shrugged. "Maybe things will change in time and we will decide to become potential mates much like Sanial and Blossom. For now, we can just be friends without the whole potential mate thing. Is that alright with you?"

Brave relaxed as he sat up and nodded. He then opened his arms. She understood and embraced the smaller squirrel. He snuffled in her chest fur as they hugged. As they disengaged. He pulled his flatpanel off his back and typed, "Thank you, Moselyn. I," he paused a moment trying to recall the word Blossom just used. "Em bar ist I can no...not get enough of your scent. I do no...not know why. It is so lovely. And your fur is so soft. I stunned. I accept friends for now. You need chitterspeak name like Sanial/Energy." His tail slowly flicked back and forth. "First part of your name sound close to moss." He stated it in chitterspeak before typing some more. "Would you accept that as your chitterspeak name?"

Moselyn thought about it for a moment.

"I find your fur is as soft as the moss I use in my summer drey," Brave typed. "Is why I suggest name."

Sanial and Blossom gigglechattered in near unison, not in a taunting way, but to imply that they agreed with the suggestion.

Moselyn nodded. "I accept." Her stomach then growled loudly much to her embarrassment.

This time, Sanial's gigglechitter was semi-taunting. He chattered, "Moss's," and switched back to Common, "stomach has spoken. It's time we go eat."

THIRTY-NINE

That night, the four of them nested in Saniel's family tree. Like back at senior school, Moselyn slept soundly. She was nuzzled awake by Saniel. She blinked, rubbed her eyes with the back of her hands and rolled over. She felt someone quickly dart out of the nest. Saniel gigglechittered.

"This time, it was Brave's tail you somehow pinned down," he whispered.

Moselyn yawned. "I'm going to sleep some more," she managed and settled back down tucked in to Saniel with Blossom, who remained asleep through this in between them.

"Of course, it's the middle of the night. I think you rolled over in your sleep and put pressure on Brave's bladder."

Moselyn quickly fell back to sleep. Soon after Brave returned and snuggled down on Moselyn's other side. As she was already fast asleep, she didn't notice he had snuffled her fur again.

"I no know how it would work," he quietly chittered to Saniel. "But I can get used to having two Biggen squirrels in shared nest. So warm." He yawned and quickly fell back to sleep himself. Saniel soon followed.

It was snowing moderately in the morning. Both Blossom and Saniel warned Moselyn that it was dangerous to venture out in such weather due to the lack of visibility. Moselyn took time to jot down notes of her initial impressions for smart squirrel life for her report. To her surprise, Blossom and Brave snuggled down on a larger sitting cushion and napped.

"In bad weather, that's what they'll do," Saniel explained. "Conserve energy by sleeping and wait out the storm." He nuzzled her along the cheek. "We could go back up to our shared room and do likewise. They might wake and join us at some point, but if you want some alone snuggle time, here's your chance."

Moselyn didn't hesitate, following him back up towards their shared room. Blossom cracked open an eye as they departed, smiled, as she hoped they would go off and have some alone time. She finally allowed herself to truly relax and was soon snoozing with Brave.

Moselyn followed him into their shared room. He got into the nest and she followed. He nuzzled her on the cheek. "Care for a little cousin squirrel-style grooming before we snuggle?" he quietly asked coyly and began to groom her backfur as she settled in next to him with licks and gentle nibbles. She stiffened. He quickly paused and began to apologize to her, but she cut him off.

"No, don't apologize. You caught me off guard, that's all. That...that felt pleasant. Please continue, but only if you help me learn to do the same in return."

Saniel nodded and soon, the two of them took turns grooming each other in the nest with licks, nuzzles, and gentle nibbles. After a brief time, they moved from back grooming to grooming each other's chest fur, which led to passionate kissing and licking of each other's noses, muzzles, and tongues. Moselyn rolled over, sprawled on her stomach, lifting her tail along her back, and arched under him. Saniel stopped himself though instinct screamed at him to mount her. Moselyn leaned-up, twisting her upper body enough to be able to nuzzle/nibble his cheek. She muttered a quiet, pleading mew.

"Why do you hesitate?" she whispered.

Saniel fought hard against the instinct within him to do as she asked. Tears filled his eyes as he collapsed onto his side into the nest next to her. "I can't. Not here. Not now."

She gently nibbled at his neck. "Why not?"

"This is The Refuge, Moselyn," he replied. "We follow smart squirrel rules here, which are the equivalent of Citizen Laws. If we couple here, we would be considered mates. In other words, the citizen equivalent of married."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "But we're not cousin squirrels."

"No, but as my family are members of The Refuge, we fall under their rules." He sighchittered and gently nuzzled her cheek. After a moment of hesitation, he continued. "It's too soon for me, Moselyn. I'm not ready for that level of commitment. We've gotten too carried away with the grooming. The times Blossom and I groomed each other last summer only led to snuggling and sleep. Not these sorts of urges."

Moselyn's tail drooped, but she accepted his reasoning. "Perhaps because you weren't mature enough then and she was too young for it to be more than grooming," she gently nibbled at one of his ears. "I'll give you the time. I'll ask you again sometime in the coming semester on some night we get alone back at school. The rules here do not apply there. I'm sure Blossom will want to go visit Brave at some point."

"I'll agree to that."

"Good." Moselyn snuggled down next to Saniel and nuzzled his chestfur. "I'll hold you to it," she whispered and was soon asleep.

He gently stroked her back with his free hand, the other being pinned under her. The Refuge's rule was the only thing that stopped him. He sighchittered quietly before sleep soon overtook him.

FORTY

The Solstice celebration at The Refuge was similar to what Moselyn was used to back home. The smart squirrels as the cousin squirrels called themselves had adopted some of the customs she knew including the exchange of small gifts. Brave had gifted her, Saniel, and Blossom some candied nuts. After some questioning prodding, he admitted Aldin had gotten them for him to give out. Saniel was a little subdued as his paternal grandmother couldn't visit that year for some reason. She did send him and Blossom red scarfs she had knitted. The ends had the same material as the back of a flatpanel, so they would stick to their fur and not get under paw while climbing. They wore them, posing for a picture with Aldin who sported the one he had been given the previous year.

One thing was different at this event. Elder Tassel had called all together. Moselyn had no idea how many squirrels there were at The Refuge prior to the gathering as she stared about all the branches filled with squirrels. There must have been over a hundred cousin squirrels present, along with Saniel's family and Raoul.

Tassel pulled her flatpanel off her back and typed as she looked at Moselyn. "Moselyn, you will need to turn on the translator program. Not all present understand Biggenspeak. All but you understand chitterspeak." She drooped her tail. "I do not mean to single you out but will be easier for me to use only chitterspeak."

Moselyn bowed to Tassel in thanks for the warning. She turned on the program on her flatpanel and lowered the volume so it wouldn't drown-out Tassel.

Tassel tucked her flatpanel back on her back and turned to the others. She bowed to them. "Thank you for gathering. This time last winter there were just over two tens of us still alive here. We very scared. Risk accepting help of Biggen Kind and family. And it was no like what our dames, their dames, and dames before them warn. We trusted Kind, but no become pups forever. He, Sunshine, and Energy very generous with food. No one starve through winter as they promised. We chose a new branch to follow choosing year-round truce and to form a colony like Friend's old home forest where all territory is shared and all help all. We turned two tragedies, the owl attacks and the terrible Biggen-set fire, into success! We have added to our numbers from afar, both smart squirrel and Biggens," she nodded towards Raoul and Moselyn. "Many smart squirrels have learned Elder things so we better prepared should tragedy strike again. Others chose learn Biggen things thanks to help of Butternut and Biggen Mentor." She paused a moment. "Mentor is home visiting family and will return soon. What I try get at is, look around. We have no only survived, we have thrived! This is why I suggest we adopt Biggen celebration of shortest day of year as our own. One to give thanks for the past year and to look forward to the year to come!"

All gathered let out a huge round of cheering in agreement. As it died down, Tassel concluded. "Go forth, spend time with your loved ones. Give thanks to the Creator and to each other. I can no wait to see how much more we thrive this coming year."

Moselyn spent a good portion of the rest of the morning taking more notes for her report, partially because she didn't want to forget what she had witnessed, but also because she was feeling homesick. She had never missed a Solstice holiday with her parents prior to this. She sighchittered and paused a moment, realizing what she had just done. She always simply sighed without a chitter added to it in the past. She had surprised herself at doing it.

Carulin walked into the room and witnessed her sighchitter and reaction to having done so. "Letting your inner cousin out a little more, I see," she stated.

Moselyn drooped her tail, which she also didn't do much before as she nodded. "I've only been here a week, but it's getting easier to do as I see everyone else here do it."

"Do you want to talk about why you just sighed?"

Moselyn looked down. "I miss my parents. I've never spent Solstice away from them."

Carulin nodded. "I understand. It can be hard. And as you know, they don't know exactly where you are so that they don't come pester you about 'acting like a cousin'. And you can't call them directly as Schoolmaster Pekan put a block on your flatpanel as part of the assignment for exploring smart squirrel life. They can relay a message to you through Schoolmaster Pekan. You could do the same if you wish. Send them a simple holiday greeting and let them know how you're doing. Obviously, I don't know how they'll react or if they'll reply."

Moselyn quickly hugged Carulin. "Thank you! I'll record a message and send it to Schoolmaster Pekan."

"If you want privacy for that, there is an empty storage room two stories below us you could use."

Moselyn hugged her a second time, tucked her flatpanel on her hip and made her way to the door the led down. She hadn't previously opened it and looked within the entire time she'd been there. She hesitated a moment when she saw it was a near vertical shaft. She got down on all four paws and proceeded down the shaft headfirst. She arrived at the landing for the second level and stood up. Again, she was in awe of what she had just done without needing to think about it too much. She looked back up the semi-dark shaft to the doorway a good five or six mits above her. She turned back to the doorway at the edge of the landing and couldn't make out the text in the dim light that made its way down the shaft. She pulled her flatpanel off her hip and awakened the screen. It gave off just enough light to see the sign reading, Storage Room. She smiled in amusement that the door had a sign.

Moselyn twisted the door handle and entered the dark space within. She felt along the wall next to the door and found a slide-switch. She slowly slid it up and overhead lights came on. The

higher she slid the switch, the brighter the lighting became. She blinked a few times waiting for her eyes to adjust and looked around. One wall contained countless empty storage sacks folded and stacked neatly. She spied several old nests. This must have been where this forest's survivors had spent their previous winter, she thought to herself.

Of course, now she had to think of what she was going to say to her folks. After some thought, it occurred to her that this space wouldn't do. She left the room, killing the lights, shutting the door behind her and quickly climbed back up to the living level, closing the main floor door behind her.

"That was quick," Carulin stated.

"I don't think that space will do. I'll be back soon." Moselyn darted outside and climbed further up the tree. She perched herself on a branch against the trunk, both feet firmly clutching the branch and one hand clutching the bark of the trunk. She thought about that some more and decided to climb up just a bit more, turn around and grip the trunk with her feet and one hand. She was just above that branch for safety. With her free hand, she held her flatpanel out and pointed the camera at herself.

"Hi, Mom and Dad! I'm having a good time on this school assignment deep in a forest with huge butternut trees." She slowly panned the flatpanel one way and the other, including pointing it downward showing she was at least 20 mits above the ground. She then pointed the camera back at her again. "I hope you're having a wonderful Winter Solstice. I love and miss you both!" She ended the message and sent it off to Schoolmaster Pekan to relay.

FORTY-ONE

The four of them had gathered at Blossom's family tree the morning after the Solstice. It was a bright sunny day, nearly blindingly so as it reflected off the snow below. Blossom seemed a little on edge. Brave tried to comfort her. She perked up a bit and smiled at him.

"Brave," she chittered. "I need alone time with Energy. Would you do something with Moss for three to four claws of time?"

Brave looked at her with his head tilted slightly sideways one way and then the other before flicking his tail up and down once.

She turned to Moselyn and switched to Common. "I need to discuss something in private with Saniel. I've asked Brave to keep you company."

Moselyn raised an eyebrow. "Alright." She turned to Brave. "What should we do?"

Brave pulled out his flatpanel and typed. “We could work on your chitterspeak,” he drooped his tail. “But that would be a waste of a sunny day. So, instead, let’s practice your jumps. Tag!” He tucked his panel on his back, turned, lightly bapped his tail against her nose and took off.

“Really?” She quipped but gave chase.

Blossom watched them briefly as they quickly ran off through the branches, Moselyn hesitating at each gap before successfully making the jump. “I hope he warns her that she must be careful in how she leads the chase should she catch him.”

“It’s not that time of winter yet, and as he’s an adult, I trust Brave would know better.” Saniel responded. “So, what do you need to talk to me alone about, Blossom?”

Blossom drooped her tail. “I’m going to ask Brave to pledge himself to me provided my parents approve as this is only my first winter.” She reached for his hands with her forepaws and squeezed them gently. “As I chose you first as a potential mate, I want your permission too.”

“Why would you need my permission?” Saniel asked. “Didn’t I already agree we would bring in a smart squirrel when the time was right? And I haven’t tried to chase off Brave, have I?”

“The tone of your voice betrays you.”

Saniel drooped his tail. “Do you really want me to speak what I’m thinking?”

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once.

Saniel sighchittered. “You’re in a hurry. You’ve always been in a hurry. You chose me as a potential mate weeks before others born last year looked for potential mates. You did whatever it took to get into Senior School a semester early. When your father tested you among other ‘Biggens’, you tapped down the fear quicker than even your mother. Smart squirrels are encouraged to wait until their second winter to mate. They may do so as soon as their second spring. Do you know why you must wait until those older than you have litters?” He paused a moment, but not long enough for her to answer. “It’s so your body can finish growing. It’s so you can watch and learn first paw how the process of leading your mate on a chase and the resulting coupling works. And to observe the whole pregnancy process, birth, and the beginning stages of raising the pups. That’s why. And I’m sure you’ve heard all this before from your parents.”

Saniel threw his hands into the air and paced around on the branch as his tail whipped about a bit. “I’m worried about you, Blossom. As I said before, you’re in such a hurry to grow-up. Slow down a little and enjoy this time while you have it. You don’t get long compared to us ‘Biggens’ and that’s unfair. Now you’re looking to pledge yourself to Brave a full season before the

earliest you can raise a family, provided he agrees to couple with you so soon.” He paused again very briefly. “You need to slow down a little, Blossom. I fear you’re going to burn yourself out long before you can raise a family or attend medical school.” He stopped his pacing and faced her. “I care for you, Blossom. I want what’s best for you. Even if I’m reduced from potential mate to just friend.”

Blossom bounded over to Saniel and embraced him. She flicked her tail up and down once. “Yes, maybe I seem to be in a hurry. I feel this urgency in the back of my mind that I need to move along quickly. I don’t know why. I just feel I need to.” She pulled back from the embrace. “Per the Elder lessons I attended, in many forests, Brave and I would already be mates after I saved his life. Technically, that would make you a mate brother to him as you helped save him. I just want to make it official, even if we have to wait until next winter to raise a family. And I still want to spend the rest of my life with you too, Saniel. I promise you this. When the time comes, Brave won’t be the only male chasing me, unless my other potential mate decides to choose to only couple with his other potential mate.”

FORTY-TWO

Brave kept ahead of Moselyn. He’d easily clear a gap between branches and wait for her. She’d stop with hesitation, looking at the distance, back-up, run, leap, and make the landing. As soon as she’d landed, Brave would take-off again, either climbing along at the same level or going further up or down depending on the branches of the trees, sometimes doubling back.

After one claw of time had passed, Brave paused again. To his surprise, Moselyn didn’t slow down and pause this time. She came charging out on the branch, leapt and landed. He barely had time to take off again. This time, he climbed up a way and leapt back to the previous tree. He looked back. Moselyn was still below him, on the previous landing branch. She was staring back at the gap. She leapt up on the branch and danced about almost losing her footing.

“I did it!” she shouted with elation.

Brave made his way back down to her. He pulled out his flatpanel and typed. “Game paused. Are you alright?” He raised his tail in a brief curl.

“Yes!” Moselyn replied with excitement as she pounced, pulling Brave into a sudden embrace. She twirled around holding him against her and nearly lost her footing again.

Brave fearfully chittered.

“Oh, sorry, Brave,” she said, carefully setting him back down. “That last jump. I didn’t have to pause and look it over, think about it, and then make the leap. I was able to just do it. Like

walking. I didn't have to think hard about it. I was just able to do it. I knew how hard and high I needed to leap to clear the distance."

Brave flicked his tail up and down once as he typed. "Blossom and Sanial will be happy to learn the news when we return. For now, we continue." His tail wigwagged about slowly. "Let's see how well you do." He tucked the flatpanel on his back, whipped around, batting the tip of his tail against her nose, calling out, "Tag!" in chitterspeak and sped-up the tree.

Moselyn gigglechittered. This was more fun than she expected as she gave chase. The gaps changed in distance, some shorter, others longer. She cleared them with ease. As she landed, she put on more speed to try and close the distance between her and Brave. On the fourth or fifth leap, Brave barely made it. As he scrambled up the branch, she landed nearly on top of him, batting at his tail gently. "Tag?" she chittered tentatively. She paused as she realized she used the chitter word instead of Common. She wigwagged her tail up and down multiple times in excitement.

Brave pulled his flatpanel off his back and typed. "Very good. But now you need to be very careful, Moselyn."

She raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

Brave's tail drooped. "You're female and still a pup by Biggen standards. If I understand Blossom and Curious right, by smart squirrel standard you are like older pup in late first winter. I'm an adult. You need to remember this is play chase. Play chase is to build confidence in jumping spaces and practice for when adult and it becomes a real chase."

"Real chase?"

Brave sighchittered as he sagged his head a moment in thought. "I no have right words sometime in Biggenspeak. I know you know about mating among Biggens. Has Blossom speak to how it work for smart squirrels?" He raised his tail into a brief curl.

"Only a little," she replied.

He flicked his tail up and down once and continued. "Among smart squirrels, when a female want make pups, she lead her chosen mate on real chase. When she believes the male has proven his ability to keep up, she lets him catch her, raising her tail and they try to make pups," he paused trying to think of the right words. "They couple/mate. After a rest, they do it again. And again, until both too tired to keep doing it. That real chase."

Moselyn's eyes widened. "Oh!" She thought for a moment. "Maybe call it mate chase?"

Brave nodded and flicked his tail up and down once. "Why did I no...not think of calling it that?" He paused a moment and continued typing. "You still older pup. I would need permission of your dame and sire to be mate. And," he drooped his tail. "I still do no...not know if I want a Biggen for second mate after Blossom." A few tears fell from his eyes. "Though you are so

beautiful and I can no...not get enough of your scent. I must no...not couple with you. If you lead me on chase, it must be play chase. You must promise me you will no...not raise your tail to me when I catch up with you and keep it play chase and not turn it into a mate chase.”

“Oh, Brave,” Moselyn drooped her tail as she opened her arms offering a hug, which he accepted. She hugged him tightly as he snuffled her fur. He really couldn’t get enough of her scent. “You are so thoughtful. I promise you that I will not raise my tail for you unless you ask and I am willing. Like you, I’m not sure I want a smart squirrel as one of my mates. It seems our other potential mates have other ideas. As I said when I first met you, what...eight days ago? I’m happy to just be friends even if we both share potential mates. And I think I now realize what it is you smell in my scent. When we get back, I’ll share the secret of my scent you find so special. For now, as I caught you, it’s your turn to catch me in play chase. And I promise you that is all it will be.” She released him. Turned around, lightly bapping him on the nose with her tail, called, “Tag!” in chitterspeak, and took off through the branches. Brave followed.

FORTY-THREE

It didn’t take long for Brave to catch her, much to Moselyn’s surprise. One moment, she was well ahead of him. The next, she leapt from one branch to another and nearly barreled him over. Somehow, he had gotten ahead of her and had been waiting for her. He lightly tapped her tail with a forepaw. “Tag,” he chittered.

She stared at him, looked back at the other tree she had leapt from and back at him again. “How...”

He started typing away on his flatpanel before she could ask the complete question. “I live here for a season. I have all that time to learn all the branches and gaps in this part of The Refuge. Once I see where you were trying to lead me, I raced ahead by a different branch and waited.” He held-up a paw sideways glancing up at the sun briefly. “It nearly the time Blossom asked for,” he typed. “We should head back.”

“Alright, but I want to try something first. Turn on the translator program, tuck your flatpanel on your back, and then climb on my back.”

Brave’s tail wigwagged in a slow circle over his back. “What are you going to do?” he typed before following her directions and nervously got on her back.

“Grab tight around my shoulders.”

Once he did so, she quickly scaled the trunk of the tree, coming to rest on a branch another ten mites up. It sagged slightly under their combined weight.

Brave chittered nervously. “What you doing, Moss? We very, very high up. Snow no save us if fall from here.”

Moselyn waited a moment for the translator program to do its job as she looked around.

“I wanted to see how easy the climb would be with you on my back,” she replied. “We can go back down a way. I agree this is too high up. Hold tight.”

“What?!” he cried out as he quickly wrapped his rear legs around her waist so he wouldn’t flip off her back as she scrabbled straight down headfirst. She switched to a branch roughly half-way between where they had started and the higher perch she had just left. She picked up speed, running out on the branch.

“Moss, no! Space too far!” Brave screamed fearfully, his tail wigwagging in circles.

“For you maybe. Remember, I’m a Biggen,” she replied as the branch sagged under them as she made the leap.

Brave continued to chitter scream as they passed through the 3 mit-wide gap. He squeaked fearfully as she grabbed onto the distant branch, barely making the landing. He lost control of his bladder, wetting his abdomen and her midback. Once they were on a more solid part of the branch, he leapt off her.

“I sorry, Moss. You scare me so bad; I lose control make bad water. I thought we would fall. Fall from this height, snow will no help cushion fall. Please no do that again. I clean your fur.” He started to move towards her back.

Moselyn was elated at pulling off the jump. She only half heard Brave. She only just then noticed the warm wetness on her mid-back and then caught the smell as the translator program finished its job. She stopped him just before he was going to start grooming her wet fur.

“No, Brave. I won’t make you lick off the urine. It was my fault. I’m so sorry I scared you so badly. I can be impulsive. I should have listened to you more. You are an adult. I have to keep reminding myself that.”

Brave drooped his tail. “You should no have to groom off my mess from your fur,” he chittered.

Moselyn listened to the translator program. “We Biggens clean our fur in a different way. Come, I’ll show you. We’ll need to go to Saniel’s family tree as that is where I left my stuff yesterday.” She looked about and drooped her tail. “But I have no clue which way we need to go.”

“This way, come,” Brave chittered. “As I speak before I know my way around this part of The Refuge. No more chase.”

“Agreed.”

FORTY-FOUR

There was no one about when they entered Saniel's family tree. Moselyn led Brave to the bathroom. "Wait here, but you'll want to set your flatpanel over on that table to keep it dry. I'll be right back."

He did as he was told and she returned quickly with what looked like a small log, but Brave quickly recognized it as a Biggen tool designed to hold liquids, but he couldn't remember the Biggen name for it.

"Remember, I promised to share the secret of my scent? I suspect this is what you've been smelling. My furwash." She popped the top of the tube and squeezed it just a little. The scent of cinnamon filled the bathroom.

Brave's eyes went wide as he took in the scent. It was like a concentrated version of Moselyn's special scent. Moselyn started to fill the tub with water. Steam wafted up from the water.

"Will you join me, Brave?" She squeezed a little of the tube's contents into the tub. The water turned foamy. She set the tube aside, went over to the trough, and urinated. The device automatically flushed it away. "You'll want to do likewise if you do join me. The warm water might trigger you into making..." she paused a moment trying out the chitterspeak term, "bad water" and didn't butcher it too badly. "If you join me, you'll have this scent on you too."

Brave was intrigued and followed her directions. Despite having lost control of his bladder outside, he still urinated a little in the trough. He moved over next to the tub. Moselyn was already in it. She was using a sponge to work the soap into her fur. The scent of his urine in her fur quickly vanished. He hesitated again.

"I will admit it's not as fun as grooming your potential mate, but the warm water feels really good."

"I see Butternut do this once. She invite me and I no join her."

Moselyn splashed a few drops at him. He wrinkled his nose in surprise. It was very warm water, like in the shallows of a pond in the middle of summer and smelled of her scent. Yes, he immediately understood why she asked him to use the trough and make bad water.

"Well, are you joining me or not? Would you prefer to lick the urine off your fur?"

Putting it that way, he crawled over the side into the soapy water. The warmth felt really good as she promised. She handed him the sponge.

"Work the foam into your fur."

He hesitated again. She gently grabbed his forepaw with the sponge in it and guided his paw along his fur. He could smell that wonderful scent as it worked its way into his fur. She let go of his paw and he quickly used the sponge to scrub all over, especially where he had wetted himself. When he was done, he was as soapy as her.

“Now here is the tricky part, Brave. We need to close our eyes, hold our breath and dunk our heads under the water for a moment. When you come back-up, the water will run down your fur and rinse most of the furwash off. Watch me.” She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and quickly dunked her head, coming back up quickly.

He followed her directions. She drained the tub and grabbed the hand sprayer. She tested the temp.

“Final rinse. Like a rain shower,” she explained. “This is to get the rest of the furwash foam out of our fur.” She sprayed water on herself and then him. She then shook herself rapidly, spraying droplets everywhere. He did likewise at the same time. Both of them gigglechittered as they splattered droplets on each other. She handed him a towel and took one for herself. He mimicked her actions and was amazed at how much of the water/dampness the towel removed from his fur.

She hung the towel on a bar and then did the same with his towel. She then grabbed a brush and brushed her fur. She went over to Brave. He hesitated for a moment and then allowed her to brush him. He leaned into the brushing chitterpurring at the attention. She gigglechittered at his behavior.

“That feels real good. Like careful claw grooming. It take a lot of practice to gently scratch skin like that with claws. Is like you trying to be potential mate,” he chittered.

“No, just friends. Friends help each other. And I feel I owe you that after scaring you so badly out there. I bet if you brushed Blossom’s fur this way, she’d love it just as much as you seem to.”

“I have been. Energy show me how. But I no ask her to do same in return. I,” he scuffed a footpaw, “was afraid.”

“So, this is where you two have been hiding!” Blossom called out as she entered the bathroom, startling both of them. She looked them over seeing that their fur was still wet. Her tail began to wigwag in agitation at what she imagined happened.

Moselyn looked at Brave. To her surprise, despite the brief startlement, he was now snuffling his own damp belly fur. “You right, Moss, I now smell like you. I like this scent.” He scampered over to Blossom wigwagging his damp tail excitedly and summarized what had happened in chitterspeak.

“...and she scared me so bad,” he drooped his tail, “I made bad water against her back like a young pup. She no allow me to groom her. She lead me here and we cleaned the mess like

Biggens do.” He snuffled into his damp fur again. “Now I smell just like her. She then used Biggen brush tool on me...”

Blossom cocked her head at a slight angle. “You no let me brush you and you let her do so?” she chittered back raising her tail in a curl briefly.

He scuffed a footpaw. “I afraid before. I see how you enjoy it. I fear I like it too much. I let her do it because what I did to her outside. I feel I owe her that. And I right. I like it a lot. It feel so good. Moss no want be potential mate still, just friend. If she change mind, I would accept her as potential second mate to you though she is a Biggen. She as kind and thoughtful as you.” He nuzzled Blossom.

He had forgotten his flatpanel’s translator program was on and Moselyn blushed through her fur at the compliment.

FORTY-FIVE

Early that afternoon, Blossom, Moselyn, Saniel, and Brave sat on a branch of the butternut tree that contained Saniel’s family home. This being one of the large ancient trees of the forest, the branch was nearly the same diameter as Brave’s nest tree back in his home forest, more than wide enough for them to perch on with room to spare. The sunny morning had given way to a cloudy afternoon. The scent of snow coming was in the air again.

“Only two more days,” Moselyn stated looking outward and down a moment. She was finally used to the height. She thought back to the play chasing with Brave from that morning and how thanks to that she could now make running jumps from branch-to-branch without consciously thinking about it. She had come a long way from the hesitation she felt first coming here just eight days before.

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once. “Yes, time fli...” She was cut off in mid-word as a feathery blur passed through the space she had been in. She vanished with the blur.

Moselyn felt warm liquid splatter her fur. She let out a shrill scream in shock as she realized it was blood.

Brave chattered in warning, “PREDATOR BIRD! MUST FLEE! TAKE COVER! CHIT! SCREE!!!” He reached for the larger Biggen squirrel as his tail flailed about in fear. “MOSS!!! WE MUST FLEE!!!” He chittered in panic forgetting she did not understand most chitterspeak.

“Only two more days,” Moselyn stated looking outward and down a moment.

Saniel looked out past her as movement caught his eye. He didn’t have time to utter a warning as it was moving very fast whatever it was.

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once. “Yes, time fli.” She was cut off in mid-word as a feathery blur passed through the space she had been in. She vanished with the blur.

Saniel’s vision turned red as Moselyn cried out. He chattergrowled and gave chase forgetting about the others. Brave’s chitter warning barely registered in his mind. He focused on chasing the large raptor that had just taken Blossom.

“MOSS!!! WE MUST FLEE!!!” Brave chittered in panic forgetting she did not understand most chitterspeak.

The biggen squirrel would not move frozen to the spot except for her hysterical screaming. Brave nipped her arm, hard enough to hurt, but not hard enough to break the skin. The shock of the pain snapped her out of it enough to look down at him. He pointed with his tail at the doorway. He was so scared she could see the whites in his eyes. He tugged at her forepaw. She understood and fled with him into Saniel’s home. Inside she screamed and cried.

As Brave retreated with her, he heard others take-up the warning across the forest. Once inside, he scaled the wall and continued to send out the chitter warning, “CHIT! SCREE!!!! PREDATOR BIRD! TAKE COVER!”

Carulin rushed into the room from the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her wet fur as she had been soaking in the tub. Water dripped off her onto the floor. “What’s wrong? Where are the others?”

Moselyn couldn’t speak. She continued to cry and scream at the same time as she stared at Carulin. Carulin saw red droplets in her fur.

“Chit, chit, scree!!!!” Brave uttered trying to fight the instinct. He was inside and safe. Tears filled his eyes as he realized he had lost Blossom. “Chit, chit, scree!!!” he uttered again. He shook his head. “Chit, chit, scree!!!” He panted trying to get ahold of himself. “Large predator bird! No go out!” He panted some more. “Chit, chit, scree!!!!” The tears rained down. “Blossom hunt killed!”

Carulin gasped. She looked about. “Where’s Saniel?” Her tail began to wigwag in panic. “SANIEL!!!”

Climbing and leaping as fast as he could, Saniel could barely keep the bird in sight. It was a swift flyer weaving through the branches. He could see Blossom clutched in one taloned foot. Her tail wigwagging. He climbed higher in the trees as he gave chase.

The brown feathered bird finally landed on a tree branch. It bent down and took Blossom by the head with its beak.

“NO!” Saniel cried out, but he knew he wouldn’t get there in time. He only realized then just how huge it was.

The bird lifted its head up and began to swallow Blossom whole. Her tail twitched again.

“NO!!!” Saniel screamed and put on as much speed as he could, his muscles screaming at him. He leapt, chitterscreaming as he sailed downward through the last gap, barreling into the raptor with all four paws outstretched as Blossom’s tail vanished. His momentum slammed the bird against the trunk of the tree. The sound of snapping bones echoed through the forest. Saniel ricocheted off the bird and was barely able to scabble onto the edge of the branch to keep from falling.

“Where’s Saniel?” Carulin’s tail began to wigwag in panic. “SANIEL!!!”

Moselyn fell silent for a moment panting for breath as she glanced toward the doorway.

Carulin shook the water out of her fur as best as she could and quickly towed down “Brave!” she spoke in the commanding voice of an Elder. “As the only other adult here, summon the Council. Then comfort Moselyn as best you can until they arrive.”

“Where are you going,” Moselyn manage to stammer between sobs.

Carulin’s eyes narrowed. “To find my son.” She darted out the doorway on all four paws, water droplets whipping off her tail. She quickly climbed through the canopy to her left as she heard the echo of something breaking in the distance.

Brave stuck his head out the doorway and gave the summons call.

The bird plummeted like a rock, sinking into the snow-covered forest floor far below.

“NO!!!!” Saniel screamed out again as he quickly scrambled down the tree and leapt onto the carcass. “Bastard! Give her up!” He began to tear into the torso of the dead raptor with his claws. “Hang in there, Blossom! I’m coming!” He was splattered with blood as he ripped into the bird

below the rib cage. The snow turned red around the carcass as it's steaming intestines spilled out onto the snow. He clawed open the stomach and Blossom's still body slid out. He rolled her in the snow to rinse off any stomach acid. He froze and stared at Blossom's still body as he was about to give her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Her head was at the wrong angle and there was a large puncture wound in her chest. Tears filled his eyes as he screamed in agony.

In his head, he heard her words from the previous summer as if she were speaking to him right then and there.

"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 in his mind. "We try our best to ensure that does not happen for as long as possible."

He gently lifted her limp form up out of the hole made by the bird and his frantic efforts to save her. He carried her body over a few mits, sinking a little with each step. He then held her body tight as he wept. Snow started falling lightly.

He thought to himself, 'Did she know her time was short? Was that why she seemed to be in such a hurry?' He nuzzled her damp fur and cried out again as he mourned the loss of his closest friend.

Carulin arrived soon after. She made a couple quick calls on her flatpanel. She then got Saniel to realize she was there. She convinced him to set Blossom's body down. She then held him tightly, rocking him back and forth as both of them wept and mourned.

FORTY-SIX

Carulin wasn't sure how long she sat there hugging her son. She knew it had been quite some time as she was starting to get cold as the snow clung to the portions of her fur she hadn't had time to properly dry off. Finally, a larger hovercraft arrived. A citizen marten and a citizen fox stepped out. Both sank slightly in the snow. A container hovered between them. Both wore constable badges on their chest fur.

"Will you be alright a moment, Saniel?" She asked. He sniffled and nodded. She released him from the hug and turned to the constables. She shivered slightly "Thank you for coming so quickly. I am Carulin of The Refuge. My husband, Jessophat, serves as an elder of The Refuge. That's the equivalent of a town councilor. At the moment, he is somewhere between here and Rock City in a hovercraft. This is our son, Saniel."

"I'm Constable Jeanna," the marten stated. She nodded to the fox. "This is Constable Makaden."

The fox left the container hovering by Jeanna, went back to the hovercraft, and returned with a blanket that he offered Carulin. She wrapped herself in it as she thanked him.

“Please forgive me as I must ask you these questions,” Jeanna stated glancing at her flatpanel. “Who is the deceased, m’am?”

Makaden moved the container over by Blossom’s body. The fox opened the container. He gently brushed the snow off her body, lifted it, and carefully laid it in the container.

Tears rolled down Carulin’s eyes. “Blossom Busheytail,” she answered and continued with answers for the next few questions before they were asked. “Smart cousin squirrel, about nine months old, equivalent to a 11- or 12-year-old citizen. Death by predation.”

Jeanna did her best to keep her composure, but gasped. “The Ambassador’s daughter?”

Makaden paused in his work and looked towards his partner.

“Yes,” Carulin answered.

“Creator bless,” both the marten and fox uttered.

“Jeanna, please come see,” Makaden requested.

She came over and he showed her Blossom’s broken neck and the puncture wound to the chest.

“Creator bless,” Jeanna uttered again as her partner closed the container. After closing it, purple lights lit up in the lid indicating a proper seal. He guided it back towards the hovercraft. She turned back to Carulin and Sanial. “At least she didn’t suffer.” She looked back at her flatpanel. It was always tough needing to collect the dead, but usually, death was by illness or natural causes. Not by being killed. Murder of any sort was rare in their society. Yet, she had offered to do just that a season earlier in her appointment as temporary ambassador to the smart cousin squirrels surrounding Rock City. Citizen predation was next to unheard of but did occur in the outer villages once in a while.

“Type of predator?” Jeanna asked, going through the questions she had to ask.

“A large raptor. See for yourself, at least what’s left of it,” Sanial replied quietly.

Jeanna looked closely at Sanial for the first time and noticed the blood and feathers in his fur.

“I tried to save her,” he stammered as his eyes filled again with tears. “I gave chase after the bird took her in its talons. It landed and the bird was swallowing her. Her tail...it was still twitching as the bird swallowed her. That’s when I caught-up and killed it trying to save her. I tore it open to pull her out. But...but...she was dead long before it swallowed her.” The tears flowed freely as Carulin hugged him close again.

“Master Saniel,” Jeanna replied. “Sometimes with blunt force trauma, like how Ms. Busheytail was killed, will result in nerves firing off for a few ceclicks after death causing muscle spasms. That is most likely what caused her tail to twitch as you witnessed. Were you and she friends?”

“They were dating,” Carulin stated as she hugged and rocked her son again.

Makaden walked over to the blood-stained depression to look at the partially ripped-apart bird carcass. He uttered a cuss under his breath. He looked over at his partner. “Jeanna, this reminds me of the owl incident a year-and-half back.”

“That was this same forest,” Carulin replied. “The smart cousin squirrel who died in that incident did so saving Saniel from the owl.”

Jeanna stared at the two citizen squirrels. “Small world.” She turned to her partner. “In what way?” she asked as she moved over to take a better look and gasped. “I’ve never seen such a huge raptor.”

“A falcon to be specific,” Makaden added. “Larger than any falcon I’ve ever seen or heard of. Just like the giant owls last time. That was just before you were assigned to assist in this area.”

Jeanna snapped photos of it with her flatpanel. She turned back to the two citizen squirrels. “Were you the only witnesses to her death?”

“I was not a witness,” Carulin replied. “Two others besides Saniel saw her die. They are at our home. The rest of the Council of Elders should be there by now.”

Jeanna nodded. “Please take us there.”

Carulin looked her over and then the fox. “You will have an easy time, Constable Jeanna, as I see you have full claws. Are you as good with them as your cousin species?”

“I can climb if that is what you are asking.”

“Good as our home is 15 mits above the forest floor. A little less than that right now due to the snow cover.”

Makaden ears twitched as Carulin looked over at him. “You could probably land your hovercraft on a branch, or we can drop a rope ladder down for you.”

FORTY-SEVEN

Makaden brought another, larger hover container out of the hovercraft and over to the eviscerated falcon carcass. Donning gloves and with Jeanna's assistance, they collected the remains. As the container sealed, the lights on it turned purple just like the ones that now contained Blossom's remains. They walked it back to the craft and indicated to Carulin and Saniel to join them. It was over a half kamit⁶ back to their nest tree. Saniel was shocked at the distance. He hadn't realized how far he had chased the bird trying in vain to save Blossom.

Jeanna piloted the hovercraft up onto the branch outside the entrance and waited for the others to step out. As they went in, she brought it down to the snow-covered forest floor and easily scaled the tree back up. Jeanna quickly observed everything within as she entered. Makaden had waited by the entrance for her. In addition to Carulin and Saniel, there was one more citizen squirrel with rather unusual fur coloration and tassel ears, whom Carulin was now comforting with her son, the three of them in a group hug/huddle. There were six cousin squirrels, one with fur nearly as orange red as her law enforcement partner. Another wept as she was hugged by two others. The last two were near the others, but also seemed to not want to be in the way. She recognized one of those two as Eldest Elder Teacher. Someone cleared their throat behind her. She turned her head and saw a citizen raccoon in the entrance. She stepped aside for him.

He glanced at her and her partner's badges as he stepped through the doorway, closing it behind him. "Pardon me, Constables," he said. "We're outside of the local power grid. We need to keep the door closed as much as possible to minimize the amount of heating necessary, which in turn, minimizes the drain on the batteries which need sunshine to recharge."

"And you are?"

"Dr. Raoul Kaynobble," he introduced himself and bowed to her.

"The cousin squirrel expert?" Makaden asked

He nodded as Jeanna tapped a few icons on her flatpanel.

"Aren't you a little far from home?" Makaden continued. "This isn't Nadowahoc, Northeast Hills region."

"Yes, this is a little far from my previous home. My current home is about a hundred mits back that way now," he said pointing back at the entrance. "I got word of what happened almost immediately afterward." He tapped the flatpanel on his hip with a claw. "You'll want to watch your step out there about three mits from the entrance. There's semi-frozen blood on it. So, I would guess that is where it happened."

⁶ Kamit-kilometer, approximately six-tenths of a mile.

“And you’re living here now because?” Jeanna asked.

“I made the move for my wife’s sake. She was recently the Parliament representative for Northeast Hills region. She’s now a teacher here at The Refuge.” He pointed to one of the cousin squirrels trying to comfort the one who was weeping. “There was an accident in her lab at Nadowahoc College resulting in her transformation from citizen to cousin squirrel. She spent six years living among cousin squirrels and saw a lot of predations and comforted a lot of those who knew the dead. When she returned, she never could quite suppress the cousin fear instincts around citizens. That is why we’ve relocated here and it’s working out here for her quite well so far.”

He pointed to the huddled group of cousin squirrels. “The one weeping is the Ambassador’s wife, Pinecone Busheytail, who is a member of the Council of Elders, and Blossom’s mother. The other one comforting her is her mother, Tassel, who is the head Elder here. The one with fur nearly the same color as your partner is Elder Foxy, leader of those who survived the fire outside of Forestdale last spring. She and the others relocated here and quickly integrated in. The remaining two are Eldest Elder Teacher, and Brave. The latter is from the forest next to Rock City Senior School and is spending the winter here recovering from injuries. The other young citizen squirrel with tasseled ears is Moselyn. She is a student at Rock City Senior School and came here for the Solstice break to study cousin squirrel life. Finally, Ambassador Aldin and Carulin’s husband, Jessophat estimate they are still half-a-klick away.”

“You don’t seem to be in as much grief as them.”

“Trust me, I’ll break down later and will probably weep. The deceased was special to all here. However, right now, I need to look and act calm for their sake.”

Jeanna nodded. “You’ll excuse me. Dr. Kaynobble. I need to conduct more interviews. She moved over towards the three citizen squirrels. Makaden stayed by the entrance with Raoul.

“I’m sure I’ll be more hinderance than help due to my species and size,” Makaden stated.

Raoul nodded. “Though Jeanna may find it a challenge herself. Cousin martens prey on cousin squirrels.”

Moselyn explained what she witnessed to Jeanna and broke down crying again. She pointed towards Brave before Carulin wrapped both her and Sanial in a group hug under the loaned blanket. Jeanna turned towards Teacher and Brave. The two cousin squirrels watched her approach but neither fled, though their tails twitched nervously.

Teacher started typing away on his flatpanel and it spoke for him. “We meet again, Constable Jeanna, though some day, I would like us to meet under better circumstances. At least now I have some grasp of written Biggenspeak.” He turned to Brave as he continued to type. “Constable Jeanna, this is Brave. You’ve seen him before, but only through recording.” He turned to Brave and switched to chitterspeak. “This Biggen Marten serve as Biggen Elder rule enforcer. She also was Elder Voice for Biggen Elders at your dame’s sire’s trial. She hunt catch him when he try to

flee from trial. She hold him down while he was punished. She offered to hunt kill him if Grand Council had decided that as his punishment.”

As her flatpanel translated the conversation for Jeanna, the marten looked him up and down, which made Brave nervous.

“Your fur looks out of place on parts of your body,” Jeanna stated, “but not too bad. You’ve healed well compared to how you looked in your video testimony about your grandfather.”

Brave slowly typed on his flatpanel as his tail wigwagged rapidly. “Thank you. I still learning Biggenspeak, Biggen Elder Rule Enforcer Jee-Nah. Is hard to do when instinct is screaming, ‘run, marten will kill eat you!’ I know you will no do that. When I no scared is easier. I still scared after seeing Blossom hunt killed. As for former Elder my old forest, he no grandsire to me. I glad he punished and banished.”

“Would it help reduce your fear if I crouch down and look smaller?”

Brave’s tail wigwagged left to right and back once as he typed on his flatpanel. “No. I’ll fight the fear best I can. Teacher warn me you would ask questions. Ask.”

“As you have stated you saw Blossom die, would you please explain what you saw?”

Brave drooped his tail and nodded while he typed. “Yes. I see my potential mate, Blossom, hunt killed. Large predator bird swoop in very fast. No time cry warning. Take Blossom with talons She speaking when hunt killed, cut off mid-word. She no suffer. I cried out warning after she hunt killed. I try pulling Moselyn into tree to safety. Where one predator bird, there can be two. She froze in fear on tree branch. I bite her to get her attention. She then follow me in. Sunshine,” Brave paused a moment. “That smart squirrel name for Carulin. She rush out of bathroom dripping wet. She got us to calm down enough to tell her Blossom was dead. She then raced out to look for Saniel as he no come in with us. I summon Elder Council as she instruct. Moselyn and I then hug crying over loss of our friend.”

“Thank you, Brave.”

Brave wept and chittered. “Blossom saved my life. She give blood healer put in me so I would live.” His tail drooped. “I could no do same for her.” Jeanna’s flatpanel translated it for her.

“I’m sorry for your loss. I must speak to your Elders.”

He nodded and scampered over to Carulin, Saniel, and Moselyn. They gathered him into their group hug/huddle and he wept with them.

Jeanna approached the group of cousin squirrels. Pinecone pushed back the tears. Butternut stepped aside as the other Elders including Teacher gathered with Pinecone. They spoke quietly among themselves. They broke out of their huddle and Tassel stepped forward.

She typed into her flatpanel. “As we have Biggens who do not chitterspeak, I will type Biggenspeak. Elder Rule Enforcer Jeanna, you appear to need to speak to us Elders. Speak.”

Jeanna nodded. “Thank you. I wish to pass my condolences onto all. My partner and I also need to know what to do with Blossom Busheytail’s body.”

All the Elders stared at her. Tassel typed-replied, “Blossom was hunt killed. How is it you recovered her body?”

Saniel pulled out of his mother’s embrace and nervously stepped forward. His fur was still splattered with blood and feathers. “Elder Tassel, I killed the raptor. It had swallowed Blossom whole. I then ripped it open and tried to save Blossom, but she was already dead.”

“We have also recovered the body of the falcon that killed Blossom,” Jeanna replied.

Tassel looked at the others who flicked their tails up and down once. “Show us this fall-can.”

They followed the marten out of the tree and down to the hovercraft and returned after ten ceclicks. All four of them were nervously wigwagging their tails.

Tassel typed again. “Saniel, please step forward.”

“We, Elders have seen this fall-can that hunt-killed Blossom and you then hunt killed.”

Saniel bowed his head. “Yes, I thought Blossom was still alive and could be saved. I will eat the bird if required of me.”

Tassel’s and the other Elder’s tails wigwagged left to right and back once as she typed. “You were very lucky in your kill. This fall-can was big enough that it could have hunt-killed you. While you could not save Blossom, you saved many others here. We rule you do not need to eat your kill as you were defending the colony.”

Saniel bowed his head. “Thank you, Elder Tassel.” He looked at the others. “And Elders Pinecone, Foxy, and Teacher.” He returned to his mother and the group hug/huddle.

Jeanna spoke up. “What is this about Master Saniel thinking he needs to eat the falcon?”

Tassel typed on her flatpanel. “Is rule here at The Refuge and at some other smart squirrel forests. If you kill, you must eat your kill unless that kill is in self-defense or in trying to save another’s life. Jessophat, Carulin, and Saniel joined our colony when it was formed. So, they follow both Biggen rules and smart squirrel rules. As he was trying to save another’s life, though in vain, we have ruled he does not need to eat the fall-can as you call the predator bird.”

Jeanna nodded. “Thank you. We still need to know what to do with Blossom Busheytail’s body.”

Pinecone shed a few tears as she typed. “We must wait for my mate.”

Jeanna nodded again. “Very well. We shall wait.” She moved over back by her partner to give the squirrels some space.

Jessophat and Aldin arrived soon after. Both went straight to their mates and comforted them. Tassel gave them a few ceclicks and then chittered for attention. She typed on her flatpanel. “Biggen marten Rule Enforcer Jeanna wish know what is to be done with Blossom’s body.”

Aldin stared at Tassel and then at the marten. “Her body? I was told she died by predation. How is it that her body was recovered?”

Saniel stepped forward. “I tried to save her, Ambassador. I killed the falcon, ripped it open, and pulled her body out of its stomach.” He drooped his tail. “But then I saw she was dead long before I had killed her killer. The Elders have ruled I do not need to eat the falcon.”

Aldin scampered over to him and hugged him tightly, holding him for a few ceclicks weeping silent tears into the larger squirrel’s chest fur. He then pulled back and looked up at Saniel. “Thank you for trying and for recovering her body. Her death won’t be in vain.”

“What do you mean?”

Aldin pulled his flatpanel off his back and called-up the Rock City Senior School agreement he and Pinecone had signed to allow Blossom to attend. The same agreement Saniel’s parents had to go over with him. Aldin scrolled through it to show Saniel a specific section.

Section 32, Paragraph C, by initialing here you have discussed with your child about organ donation should he/she pass while attending school and they agree to be a donor. Or by initialing here, you have discussed the same with your child and they do not wish to be a donor.

He showed Saniel that the first line was initialed. “I know of one potential recipient already and there may be others depending on which organs were not damaged. Once the medical examiner has done what they need to do, I need to reach out to my contacts in several forests.”

Aldin paused a moment and then continued. “There’s one more thing, which may be a bit harder for you and your classmates She reached-out to me after the optional lab she took where she killed and dissected a small rodent.” He paused briefly. “And ate as much of it as she could with her lab partner finishing it. She asked me to help her complete the required documents to will her remains to the school’s biology program if there were any recovered after her death. Of course, none of us imagined this would happen so soon.” He shed a few tears.

Pinecone moved up next to her mate and quickly typed. “Blossom continues to help others even after her death.” Her eyes filled with tears and Aldin embraced her. The two wept on each other’s shoulders.

FORTY-EIGHT

From: Pekan, Schoolmaster, Rock City Senior School

To: All Rock City Senior School students and parents

Subject: Spring Semester delayed due to student death

It is with a heavy heart that I report that our first cousin squirrel student, Blossom Busheytail, was killed near her home by predation yesterday afternoon. Our condolences go out to her family and friends. Out of respect for the deceased, we will delay the start of the spring semester by a week, giving those of you who knew her more time to mourn at home. We have counselors in place near all of you for those who wish to use them. We will also have counselors on campus.

Moselyn’s flatpanel buzzed indicating an incoming message. She answered it and was surprised to see Schoolmaster Pekan on screen.

“Schoolmaster Pekan?”

The fisher nodded. “Hello Moselyn. I hope you are doing alright after what has happened. There is a counselor in Oak Valley, about a 20 ceclick hovercraft ride away from you should you feel you need to speak to one.”

“Thank you, Schoolmaster,” Moselyn bowed her head. “I might put those services to use. It’s been a rough time here.”

Pekan nodded again. “Very understandable. Due to the circumstances, you will not be required to write a report about your stay at The Refuge.”

Tears filled Moselyn’s eyes. “I will still write and turn one in, Schoolmaster. If for no other reason than because Blossom would have expected me to finish this assignment.”

“Very well. I’m sorry to bring this up, but I must. School policy is that no one is to have a room alone. But we don’t have any new female students joining us this term. Due to the circumstances, I am willing to waive that policy for this term only or you can be moved into a triple with two other existing students. Next fall you’ll be back to a regular room with a new roommate.”

Moselyn closed her eyes thinking for a moment. “If possible, I’d rather be alone this semester. I suspect Saniel will need company and it would be easier to provide that company if I don’t need to make arrangements with two other roommates.”

Pekan nodded. “Very well. One more thing. Your parents wish to speak to you. As you know we shield students exploring alternative lifestyles from family pressure. However, due to what has occurred, I said I would ask, warning them you might not wish to speak to them. They never sent a reply through me from your last message.”

Moselyn closed her eyes again for a moment. She opened them and answered, “Give them my mentor’s contact info. I’ll let her judge whether or not I should speak to them at this time.”

Soon after the constables had left the previous evening, Blossom’s siblings and their potential mates arrived, wept with the others and pulled Brave away with them, naming him their brother in blood and they would mourn the loss of their sister with their brother. Brave hadn’t returned yet. So, lunch was a quiet, somber event that day with it being just Saniel’s parents, Saniel, and Moselyn.

“I spoke briefly with your parents this morning as you requested, Moselyn,” Carulin spoke as she lathered cherry preserves on a piece of toasted butternut bread. “I told them that before they pass judgement on this lifestyle, they should come see what it’s like for themselves. Then, and only then, if they wish to speak to you, I’ll allow it.”

“How did they react?”

Carulin looked directly at Moselyn. “They cut-off the call.”

Moselyn’s tail drooped. “Thank you. Obviously, if I spoke to them, it would just make things worse.”

Saniel remained silent, looking down at his lunch, but not touching it.

“And you, young man,” Carulin lightly scolded Saniel, “had best eat something. You know she’d want you to go on with your life. I’ve arranged a counselor session for you later this afternoon over in Oak Valley as you, obviously, need it.” She glanced at Moselyn. “The counselor can take you both at once, or back-to-back if you feel you need it too, Moselyn.”

“Thank you, Carulin. When I spoke to Schoolmaster Pekan earlier this morning, he suggested it. I do feel I need to talk things through with a professional and not just about Blossom.” She drooped her tail.

Saniel finally picked up the butternut butter and cherry preserve sandwich and started eating. But he continued to remain silent.

FORTY-NINE

“I’ll need to apologize to Mom for my sulking and thank her for making me go,” Saniel stated as he and Moselyn got back into the hovercraft for the trip back to The Refuge. “Though, I will probably need some more sessions once we’re back at school.”

“I’m happy to see you starting to sound normal again. Though, I think the counselor will need help from the look on his muzzle when you finished describing the encounter.” Moselyn shuddered a little.

As the hovercraft lifted off, Saniel reached for and squeezed Moselyn’s hands gently. “I appreciate your willingness to sit in on that, Moselyn. I wasn’t sure if I could share it only with him. Though, I was afraid I would traumatize you in the process. It really did help to get it off my chest, so to speak.”

“I trust and care for you, Saniel,” she replied, gently squeezing back. “We shared that trauma. It was best we worked it out together. You did the best that you could with the circumstances.” She scuffed a footpaw. “And I’ve watched a lot of horror films over the years.”

Saniel was taken aback. “Horror films?”

Moselyn nodded. “I liked to scare myself.” She fell silent for a moment and then continued more quietly. “But now that I’ve experienced the real thing, I don’t think I’ll watch many of those anymore.” She then waggled her fully clawed toes on her left foot. “And now, I also know that I’m in the right about growing these out.”

“Are you really sure about your decision?”

She nodded. “I believe I’ve grown a lot inside in these past two weeks at The Refuge, Saniel. I’ve made a lot of friends among your smart squirrel neighbors. Why would I want to abandon that now, especially, when that would mean leaving you? You heard me in there. From the first day I met her, Blossom wanted me to be there for you.”

Saniel smiled while shedding a tear. “Thank you.” He squeezed her paws gently again and then released them. “So, do you wish to work on your report on the ride back?”

Moselyn gigglechittered. “Silly. I can work on that later. Right now, what I’d like to do is comfort,” she switched to broken chitterspeak, “my potential mate.” She leaned over and started to groom his right arm and neck with licks and gentle nibbles. Saniel didn’t resist and began

doing the same. Remembering her earlier promise to him, mutual grooming was as far as it went on the ride back.

As they entered Saniel's home, a familiar voice chattered out and bounded-up to the two of them. All three group hugged.

"Brave!" Moselyn exclaimed. "I was starting to worry about you."

"Sunshine speak you go see special healer," Brave chattered, drooped his tail and pulled his flatpanel off his back and typed. "Sorry. Carulin said you both went to see a special healer, one who helps with the hurt inside."

"Yes, we did," Saniel replied. "He was a big help. If you need to speak with him, we can help you get an appointment."

"But you might find it hard to speak to him, Brave," Moselyn added. "He's a wolf."

Brave nervoustailtwitched at the thought of speaking to a biggen wolf healer. "I'm alright," he typed. "It helped me to spend time with my three new brothers and their potential mates. I nested with them last night. They want me to continue nesting with them. Will you mind if I nest with other smart squirrels instead of you?"

"Of course not!" Saniel replied.

Moselyn offered to hug Brave and he accepted the embrace from the larger squirrel. "You are a very special friend to us, Brave. You are welcome to join us anytime. We are not offended you wish to nest with your new brothers."

Brave bowed in thanks and typed some more. "I also talked with Elder Foxy. She is very helpful. She has seen a lot of smart squirrels die." He shuddered all over for a moment. "She also surprised me with some of what she said. She knows of three or four females who might try to win me over in a few weeks after I'm allowed a little more time to mourn," he drooped his tail, "Blossom's death." A few tears trickled down his eyes.

"So soon?" Moselyn asked.

"Smart squirrels move on quickly. We must. As a prey species, if we dwelled on a loss for long, we would never have a happy moment. And Blossom would expect me to move on, just as she would do so if it had been me instead of her who was hunt killed." His tail drooped again. "Elder Foxy said those females have been eyeing me since I first arrived, but kept their distance because Blossom already claim me as hers. They would have had to approach her first for permission,

much as she gave you permission to win Saniel over. It will be dark soon. I need to get back to my brothers and their potential mates.”

“Wait here a moment, Brave,” Saniel asked. He darted up to his room and returned quickly with a small brush in his hands.

“That Blossom’s Biggen fur brush tool,” Brave chittered in surprise.

“Yes, she had left it in my room after the last night we all slept together. She reminded me when you and Moselyn were play chasing, per the rules in many smart squirrel forests, Blossom and you were already mates because she saved your life. I’m sure she would have wanted you to have it. So, this is now your fur brush.”

Brave took the brush and clutched it close to his chest, closing his eyes and more tears ran down his muzzle. “I smell her scent on it,” he chittered. Saniel quietly translated the exchange to Moselyn. Brave then reached out to Saniel with open arms and the two hugged tightly.

“Thank you,” he chittered as they released each other. Brave turned to Moselyn and typed on his flatpanel. “Will you please brush my back, Moss?” He offered the brush to her.

“Of course, Brave,” she replied. She took the brush from him and gently stroked his back fur with it. He arched into it and chitterpurred at the attention.

As she finished, he looked to Saniel and chitterspoke. “That feel so good. You lucky she Biggen like you, Energy. Else, pup or no pup, if she led me on chase right now, I would become her mate.”

Saniel gigglechittered as he translated for Moselyn. She hid her face in her tail in embarrassment because a little part of her was starting to feel as attracted to the smaller cousin squirrel as she was to Saniel.

“Maybe you need to find out who the females are who are interested in you, Brave.” Saniel stated. “Then, require them all to brush you. The one who does the best job wins.”

They all gigglechittered at the suggestion.

FIFTY

There were only a few days left in the extended break. Saniel and Moselyn planned to head back to school a couple days early to settle in. They were making the rounds saying goodbye to all their friends. Moselyn’s flatpanel chirped. She looked at Saniel with a raised eyebrow as she answered the call. Carulin appeared on screen.

“Hello Carulin. Why the sudden call? We are planning to get back in about half a klick.”

“You have visitors if you wish to see them,” Carulin spoke quietly as she shifted the angle of her flatpanel to give Moselyn a glimpse of her parents who had their back to Carulin sitting on cushions chitchatting with Jessophat.

Moselyn gasped. “I’ll be there shortly.” She ended the call, looked at Sanieel and darted out of the tree they were in. He followed. They quickly arrived at Sanieel’s family tree. A hovercraft was perched on the branch outside the entrance. She hesitated just past the hovercraft. Sanieel caught up with her.

“Are you sure you want to face them?” He asked.

“Yes, I need closure, Sanieel.”

“I’m here for you and so are my folks if you need us,” he replied.

“I know. Come on.”

She led him in. “We’re back, Carulin,” she called-out, rounding the corner into the main living space.

Her parents stood up from the cushions they had been sitting on making small talk with Carulin and Jessophat. They looked at their daughter. She looked back at them. They came running up to her. They embraced each other affectionately. Her mother prattled about how awful it must have been to lose her roommate. Her father was just happy to see she was okay. Neither of them said anything about her claws. Once they pulled back, Moselyn introduced them to Sanieel.

“Mom, Dad, this is my boyfriend, Sanieel. Sanieel these are my parents, Darry and Lusinda Pinette.”

Sanieel bowed. “I’m happy to meet you Mr. and Mrs. Pinette.”

Darry offered his hand and Sanieel firmly shook it. He then embraced Lusinda in a hug.

“Your boyfriend is quite strong,” Lusinda quipped.

“Living this far off the ground is the ultimate work-out program, Mrs. Pinette,” Sanieel replied.

They made their way back into the living room and all sat on cushions.

Moselyn cut to the point. “What changed your minds, Mom and Dad? I know my mentor wouldn’t have allowed you to come otherwise. Or she would have warned me to stay away if you had fooled her into allowing you to come. Especially after you hung up on her.” Moselyn’s tail bristled a little.

“You never were one for small talk,” Darry replied. “Yes, in a foolish fit of anger we hung-up on Carulin. We then had a lengthy conversation with the Schoolmaster. And then conversations with other citizen squirrels who had embraced their cousin side. We then called Carulin back and apologized and asked if we could come see you.”

“We still don’t approve of this,” her mother, Lusinda, added. “But obviously, it’s what you want. You’re a young adult now.” She paused a moment. “And we don’t want to lose contact with our only child. We missed you so badly these past couple of weeks when you didn’t come home for the Solstice break.”

“Are you willing to come home for a few days before going back to school?” her father asked.

“Are you going to require me to trim my claws?”

“No,” Lucinda replied quickly glancing over at Saniel. “And I can see why you won’t. And if we made you do it, you’ll just grow them out again. Despite all those we’ve spoken to, I just can’t understand why anyone would do this. I was scared out of my fur when we stepped out of the hovercraft as I briefly looked down. But I’m not going to stop you if it means I won’t lose you.” She looked around the room. “I can’t get over how huge the trees are here. And this isn’t as primitive as I feared it would be. It’s sort of like home.”

“Accept we’re 15 mits above the forest floor,” Moselyn added. “And rely on solar panels and batteries for power as we’re too far from the nearest village to be within their power broadcast area.”

Her parents nodded.

“If I go home, can Saniel join us for those few days?”

That caught everyone off guard as they all glanced at each other.

“It’s only fair,” Moselyn continued. “His parents have hosted me for over two weeks. You can do likewise for a few days.”

“Where will he stay? We don’t have a spare room.”

“In my hammock, much as I’ve shared his hammock and nest since about a month into the fall semester.”

“Along with Blossom, and here with Blossom’s cousin squirrel boyfriend,” Saniel added and then his tail drooped. “At least until Blossom was taken from us.”

Her parents’ jaws dropped for a moment.

“Snuggle sleep, I assure you,” Moselyn added.

“No coupling?” Darry asked.

“Mr. Pinette,” Saniel replied. “I have not coupled with your daughter.”

“Though I will admit I tried to get him to do so once. He refused stating he wasn’t ready for that step in our relationship.” She looked down. “And as we are in a smart squirrel settlement, we must follow their laws. If we had coupled, we’d be married according to their laws.”

Moselyn’s parents looked at each other with shock clearly showing on their muzzles. After a moment, they spoke quietly back and forth.

“We grant permission for our son to go with you if you allow him to go,” Jessophat stated.

Carulin nodded in agreement. “He will be on his best behavior,” she added.

“Yes, of course!” Saniel agreed.

“Very well,” Darry replied. “Go pack your stuff so we can get going. It’s over a klick to get home.”

Moselyn hugged her parents thanking them. She then hugged both Jessophat and Carulin thanking them profusely for hosting her. She followed Saniel to his room to gather their things.

FIFTY-ONE

Saniel reported to Ms. Trenchworth’s biology lab.

“You wished to see me, Ms. Trenchworth?” Saniel asked the wolf.

“Yes, Saniel, please have a seat.” Saniel sat on a sitting cushion near her desk. Once he was comfortable, she jumped right in. “We have what’s left of Blossom’s body in a portable stasis chamber. I know it was willed to our school for educational purposes, but I don’t know what we can do with what’s left. I’m turning to you as you knew her best. Would discussing this with you further be too much this soon? If it is, it can wait. As you know a stasis chamber will preserve a body for a year or more.”

“No, go on, Ms. Trenchworth,” Saniel replied and braced himself. “I can always see the counselor if necessary.”

“Many of her organs were damaged when she was killed. Recipients were found for some of the others along with her right eye and tail as she indicated she was willing to be an organ donor.”

“Her tail is gone?” Saniel replied in surprise.

Ms Trenchworth glanced at her flatpanel. “A cousin squirrel in Acadian Valley District had recently lost his tail to a predator but escaped from becoming that predator’s meal. Thanks to the miracles of our health system, her tail has been grafted onto his tail stump. He’ll be tended to at that hospital until spring. Only time will tell how well it will work for him.”

Saniel closed his eyes briefly and shed a few tears. “That’s wonderful. I hope it heals properly. I also hope things work for the recipients of the other organs that could be used. It was really important to the Ambassador and his mate.”

The wolf nodded. “That said, her body isn’t in the kind of shape needed to dissect it in class, which is what I suspect she was hoping for. So, what can we do with it?”

Saniel looked directly at the wolf. “Ms. Trenchworth, I suggest you have a conversation with her parents as you probably wouldn’t believe me if I told you what to do.”

While he sat there, she called Aldin and Pinecone. Half a click later, Ms. Trenchworth looked pale through her fur as she wrapped-up the call. She turned to Saniel. “I’ll need to discuss this with the Schoolmaster.”

“Let him know I’m willing to head this up.”

A few days later, many of the students along with Saniel, Moselyn, Drexle, and Hersah gathered in the school’s auditorium. Ms. Trenchworth, and Schoolmaster Pekan were with them. A counselor stood by.

Schoolmaster Pekan turned to the gathered students. “We have gathered today to pay our final respects to one of our own, our first smart squirrel student, Blossom Busheytail. At his request, Saniel will lead this remembrance.”

“Thank you for allowing me to head this up, Schoolmaster Pekan and Ms. Trenchworth,” Saniel stated bowing to them. He then looked at the other students gathered. “I literally knew Blossom for her entire life. Her parents granted me permission at my parents’ encouragement to watch her come into this world last winter. I helped to care for her and her siblings. I taught them Common as the Ambassador calls our language. In mid-summer she joined me in my drey asking me to be her boyfriend. She studied hard on her own to get into the school a semester early so as to remain with me.” Saniel sighed a moment. “And, knowing I’d outlive her, she worked on getting Moselyn to join our little group.” He hugged her briefly. “And I witnessed her death, though I hadn’t realized it at first, giving chase and killing her killer.” Tears rolled down his muzzle as he sniffled.

“They mature differently than we do. I believe their minds grow faster than their bodies, which is understandable as prey creatures. When did your parents first have ‘The Talk’ with you about sex? They do it at roughly a season in age, roughly two-and-half months or about when you and I would be about four. Can you imagine that? Also, they’re basically on their own at five months. Can you picture your parents kicking you out of your home at six or seven years of age?”

Saniel paused a moment. “When she asked to join me in my drey last summer, she told me about that. How her parents taught her about sex when she was just a season old. They also warned her at that same time how their kind are on the dinner menu for most cousin predators and how she must be cautious and wary at all times. It is rare after death for a body to remain among her species as most die by predation.” More tears trickled down his muzzle. “Sadly, that fate occurred way too soon for her. We usually cremate out dead. Her people’s customs are different from ours. On the rare occasion that a body remains after death, they lay their dead on the forest floor for scavengers. Elder Hope has already indicated we may lay her remains where her people lay theirs in Learn Forest as they now call the forest next to our school. This graveyard is not near any smart squirrel’s territory so as to not endanger the living by what may be attracted by the deceased. We will set-up cameras. So, per her wishes, we will use her body to learn from her remains. In this case, how scavengers, insects and worms help to decompose and dispose of a body.”

“However, Blossom’s mother altered that tradition when her first mate, Twig, died saving my life. His remains were consumed by a Citizen family in need.”

The stage curtain behind him opened showing some of the equipment from the home economics lab set-up including a stainless food prep counter, utensils, and a cooktop with a large frying pan. Saniel walked over to a hovering stasis container and typed the release button on the hover stasis container. It hissed and slowly opened revealing Blossom’s partial remains. Her abdomen was cut open. Her right eye socket was raw and empty. Her tail was missing. Some present gasped at what they saw. Saniel gently lifted her body out of the container and laid it on a large cutting board on the steel prep table. He nudged the container out of the way. “I think if Blossom could see us from wherever her soul is now, she’d be honored to know her friends consumed her remains or at least part of them. I’m not going to force any of you to do this. And I hope no one puts others to shame one way or the other who chose to or chose not to do so...”

Stacker, the fox who had been Blossom’s lab mate, cried out in horror interrupting him. “I helped her finish eating the small rodent we had dissected in class! She had fled from the lab because of the sound of the small rodents’ bones cracking throughout the lab. She feared her classmates would eat her next.” He looked about. “And now, you’re suggesting we should do just that!” Tears ran down his muzzle. “I don’t know if I can do it!”

Saniel went up to the fox and embraced him. “It’s alright, Stacker. It’s hard for all of us. As I said, no one is being forced to eat her and there is no shame to just sit back and watch. We don’t need to consume all of her remains. We’ll take what is left and lay in the forest per her people’s older tradition.”

He turned back to the other students. “Again, no one is forcing any of you to participate or not. There is no shame in it. No one will make fun of you for it. I’m sure some present would appreciate the moral support if you simply stood by and watched. We all knew Blossom.”

Stacker nodded as Sanial turned back to Blossom’s remains. “My parents taught me how to do this on some small rodents we trapped and killed that tried to move into our storage rooms. I hope it’s easier to do on a larger body.” He took a boning knife, stretched out Blossom’s right arm and cut through the arm to the bone. He worked along the bone to the wrist without cutting all the way through the skin at the wrist. He flipped it over onto the cutting board and worked the knife between the muscle and skin. He lifted the chunk of muscle off, flipped the skin back over the bone and laid the muscle directly on the cutting board. He cut a portion of it into smaller pieces. He sprinkled oil into the frying pan and laid two of the pieces of meat in the oil. The meat sizzled. Other students followed his lead, tears in their eyes. Some chewed on small raw chunks. When the first two pieces were cooked, much to their shock and surprise, Sanial and Moselyn ate them.

“She was close to us. Now she will be a part of us for the rest of our lives,” Sanial explained.

Tears freely flowed from both his and Moselyn’s eyes as they stepped aside for the others to be able to do likewise. Even Drexle and Hersah participated. Then Ms. Trenchworth and Schoolmaster Pekan joined.

“Are you sure you wish to do this, Schoolmaster?” Several of the students asked him as he lifted a cooked piece towards his mouth. “You’ll just provide truth to the rumors.”

The fisher paused and sighed sadly. “I feel I must do so to honor her people’s ways. And I never ask a student to do anything I wouldn’t join in and do myself.” He ate a piece like all the others.

All were crying in the end. They had barely consumed an arm and a portion of a leg. Sanial reminded them that they didn’t need to eat all of her body as the remains would be placed in the smart squirrel graveyard.

The counselor was very busy the rest of the day. She sought counseling of her own the following day.

FIFTY-TWO-EPILOGUE

The cherries were ripe. Two cousin squirrels sat in the tree nibbling on the bright yellow fruit with their two young pups. Both pups muzzle’s were stained yellow from the juicy fruit. They had special permission to sit in this, Carulin’s tree. They had backpacks with them and once they had their fill, they were to harvest cherries for her.

“Now you are a little over one season old,” their mother said between nibbles, “you old enough to learn how you came to be.” She nuzzled her mate whose fur was a little out of place in spots all over his body. She had a couple of similar small spots on the sides of her abdomen.

“Dame, you and Sire already speak to us about how pups are made,” their male pup replied. He had random white splotches in his gray fur.

“Yes, Speckle, we have,” their sire replied. “But you have also asked why it is you two can Biggenspeak and we can no speak it without using a Biggen viewer. And why Elder Pinecone and Elder Voice Friend ask you call them granddame and grandsire. That is what we speak of today.”

The two pups stopped nibbling on cherries and gave their parents their full attention. They loved the cherries they first tried that morning, but they really wondered why it was they could Biggenspeak and their parents could not.

The male pup spoke again, Grandsire Friend and Granddame Pinecone adopt you, sire.”

Brave flicked his tail up and down once. “Yes, they adopt me. Now you learn why. Last winter Pinecone’s and Friend’s first-born pup, Blossom, was hunt killed by big predator bird. Biggen Energy give chase and tried to save her. He killed the bird, but he was too late. Blossom was dead.” A few tears fell from his eyes. “She was my first potential mate. She had saved me last harvest time giving some of her blood to me so I would live. As her blood flow in me, is why Second Sire Friend and Second Dame Pinecone adopt me.”

“Then you were mates if you share blood,” their daughter chittered, “as you taught us.”

“Moss, I was sleep injured.” Brave sighchattered and pulled his flatpanel off his back and started typing. The flatpanel read his words in Common. “Need more words then chitterspeak has. I was in a coma from blood loss. I didn’t know she give me blood until I awakened. Elder Teacher rule it does not count as becoming mates when done to save a life. And she was still a pup at the time. I had seen two winters at that time. She had not seen her first winter yet.”

“Oh,” both their pups replied in unison.

“After she die,” Lily continued, “Biggen healers rush me to Biggen healing place...” she paused and pulled her flatpanel off her back and typed. “I need to use Biggenspeak like your father as it have more words. I work hard to learn it for you two. I try again. After Blossom killed and Saniel recovered her body. I was rushed to a special hospital where they replaced my ovaries with hers. I was told that if my body did not reject them and it worked, I’d need to wait until spring to try and get pregnant.”

“Why did your ovaries need to be replaced?” Moss asked in Biggenspeak since her mother was using Biggenspeak through the flatpanel.

Lily smiled at her as she typed. “Moss, mine didn’t work right. I couldn’t produce eggs. Without eggs, males could give me their seed all day long and no pups would take. The Biggen term for that is barren.”

“But now we’re here,” Speckle stated.

“Yes, Speckle, because the operation worked,” Lily type-replied. “I do not fully understand how it worked.” She drooped her tail. “They altered Blossom’s ovaries to fool my body into thinking they were mine. Otherwise, my body would have attacked and destroyed her ovaries like an illness and you wouldn’t be here.”

“And Uncles Nimble and Shadow and Aunt Buttercup?” Moss asked.

“They were her mates and littermate before healers did what they did,” Brave chittered. “While she heal, your dame discuss with them about this. They agree, she must approach me first as Blossom’s female parts were now in her.”

“And I won him over,” Lily chitterpurred as she nuzzled Brave.

“With permission of her former mates,” Brave added.

“And because Granddame Butternut taught me how to use a fur brush unlike other females who eye him.”

“That how your dame win me over though she already share two mates with her sister. She is really good with a fur brush.” Brave chitterpurred as he nuzzled Lily.

“And now thanks to Biggen doctors you’re here,” Lily typed as she concluded explaining how her pups came to be. “You are little miracles,” she added in chitterspeak.

“Moss, we were going to name you Blossom to honor her,” Brave added. “Most who knew her speak it too soon to use her name again. So, we name you for a very good Biggen friend of mine who was Blossom’s nest sharer at Biggen school.” He sighchittered and typed on his flatpanel. “Like your dame said, Biggenspeak has more words. What I mean is that Biggen shared a room with Blossom at senior school. Moss is her chosen chitterspeak name.”

Moss’ eyes shot wide. “Oh! You mean I’m named for Moselyn, Sanial’s potential mate?”

Brave flicked his tail up and down once.

“Neat! She was so kind to both of us when she visited a few weeks ago.”

Lily drooped her tail as she switched back to chitterspeak. “Now you know how you came to be, I understand if you no wish to call me your dame anymore. You come from Blossom’s eggs, which makes her your real dame. Elder Pinecone and Elder Voice Friend are your real granddame and grandsire.”

Moss and Speckle quickly embraced Lily. They spoke in near unison. “It doesn’t matter whose eggs we came from. We grew in you. You bore us. Your blood flows in us. You are our dame.”

Lily wept for joy.