

TEN

Word quickly spread as they arrived back among the others of The Refuge. Tassel and Pinecone quickly gathered to greet the newcomers. Teacher was busy teaching class. Nothing short of an emergency would interrupt his class time. Tassel's eyes widened as the newcomers approached. She cried out in joy as she leapt over to the newcomers and nearly barreled them over in a group embrace. She started nuzzling both of them.

"My pups!" she cried-out with joy. "I thought owl hunt/kill you!"

"Dame!" both cried out as they embraced Tassel. "Is good you live. We thought predator bird hunt/kill all others."

"We have much to speak, my pups." She glanced over towards Pinecone who came up next to her mother. "First, introductions. This your older littermate, Pinecone."

They sniffed each other. Pinecone embraced both of them happy to know she had surviving full siblings. "Older?" one of them asked.

"She born two," Tassel held-up two claws, "winters before you."

Their eyes widened. "The one the Elders banished?"

Tassel flicked her tail up and down once in the affirmative. "I, head Elder now and Pinecone no banished now. She serve on Elder Council. She friend of biggen squirrel whose territory this was. Is good she make biggen friend."

Pinecone and Tassel explained what happened. Foxy opened her backpack and shared cherries much to Tassel's and Pinecone's delight. Others brought out butternuts to share during the long tale. Tassel's younger adult pups were amazed at what had occurred and the truce rule throughout the forest.

"You warn us as pups never trust biggens or be pups forever."

Tassel nodded flicking her tail up and down once. "Yes, but sometimes, no real choose. If choose is trust biggen and risk be pup forever or starve/die, which is better choose?"

Her adult pups flicked their tails up and down once in the affirmative, understanding.

Tassel gestured around her with her tail. "We no become pups forever. Biggen squirrel more like big squirrel than Biggen. He live in trees like us. He gather food for winter and store in midden. Biggen's chitterspeak name is Kind. He, mate, and their pup join our colony and joined their territory with ours. They are away today doing Biggen things. You meet them later. Kind serve on Elder Council." Again, they stared at Tassel in surprise.

The two adult pups briefly explained how they survived by raiding all the middens of those they thought had died. It had been touch-and-go during some of the winter storms with just the two of them to share body warmth. Another squirrel suddenly cried out in joy as it nearly barreled over one of the two newcomers as they finished their tale.

“Mate! You live!”

It only took him a brief moment to recognize her scent. “Mate?” he responded in surprise and embraced her in return, tears running down his cheeks as he nuzzled her neck.

The female disengaged from him and scuffed a paw on the branch and looked down briefly and drooped her tail. She glanced over towards a nearby branch where another squirrel perched, wigwagging his tail with hesitation. She waved the other over with her tail. “When predator bird die and Elder Tassel call us together to tell us, you no come. I thought bird hunt/kill you.”

The other squirrel cautiously approached. He and Tassel’s son sniffed each other nervously.

“First Mate, this is Beech Leaf, my second and current mate.” She wiped a tear from her eye with the back of her paw. “First Mate, I chose new mate when I thought you dead.”

“Maple Leaf speak fondly of you all winter, Maple’s First Mate. Is good to see you live. Maple and I raise litter of pups.” Beech drooped his tail. “I step aside. She your mate first. I no fight you for her.”

“No,” Tassel’s son replied wigwagging his tail back and forth left to right. “You raise pups. I no get in way. Pups important. They need their sire. You stay. You no leave mate and pups.”

Maple chattered to get both their attentions. She looked to one and then the other, nuzzling each in turn. “I chose both of you.”

Her first mate stared in confusion, his tail wigwagging rapidly. Beech froze in place waiting to see what would happen.

Tassel stepped in. “My adult pup no know.” She turned to her son. “My pup, here, you may share mates.”

“Yes,” Maple replied. “If you agree share, you both my mates. Is best solution.”

Tassel’s son wigwagged his tail hesitantly and was silent a moment before finally managing, “I will try.” He paused again. “Is hard take in. So much change, so fast. Learn littermate and I no alone. Now all shared territory. Always truce. Trust Biggens. Biggens share territory with us. Biggen is Elder. Dame head Elder. Dame’s new mate is Elder of Elders. Mate live. Mate have new mate. Share mates. Is hard.” He repeated as he wigwagged his tail in distress while lowering his head and placing his forepaws on it while closing his eyes. “It make my head hurt.”

Beech hesitantly sniffed him again, then gently nudged him to catch his eye. “Yes, is a lot all at once to understand, First Mate. I think you will like changes in time.” Beech snuggled up to the other male affectionately, who tensed at first as Beech started to groom him. Eventually, he relaxed and looked deeply in Beech’s eyes. Something seemed to change in Tassel’s son as both he and Beech sat-up and embraced. Beech gestured towards Maple with his tail “I think we should give Maple some attention now that she choose both of us, don’t you, First Mate?”

The unnamed male flicked his tail up and down once. In unison he and Beech began to groom Maple from either side before grooming each other again with Maple taking turns grooming each of them in turn. With a brief glance at Tassel they moved off together into the forest, Maple chatting away to catch-up her first mate on what he had missed. “...I sure our pups will like having a second sire...”

“Littermate has his mate again,” Tassel’s other son stated watching his brother depart. “Is good.” He drooped his tail. “I saw predator bird hunt/kill mine.”

“Ah, my pup,” Tassel pulled him into an embrace to comfort him. “There are several females in our group who need a mate. Many in Elder Foxy’s group lose their mates in the fire. I’m sure one of them will catch your eye soon. Come. You meet my current mate, Teacher, and your half-littermates, our pups from this winter.” (drooptail) She began to lead him away as she added, “You know owl hunt/kill your sire.”

He drooped his tail. “Yes, sire try and save some pups...” he stated, the rest of his sentence lost as he followed Tassel back through the treetops.