

FIFTEEN

The following morning, Birch's pups with their sire in tow arrived at Jessophat's and Carulin's nest tree. Carulin met them at the entrance. The three pups sniffed her. Their sire was hesitant but did so at the encouragement of his pups. To his surprise, she smelled like the forest like other smart squirrels and not like the biggens they had encountered right after the fire. The pups gave her their names. They then explained that their sire hadn't chosen one yet. Carulin glanced at him. He grasped his tail to keep it from wigwagging in fear and confirmed. Carulin nodded.

"Go on in, Red, Cherry, and Brighteyes. You will see where to wash your paws near the 'cool midden'. I need speak to your sire a moment."

"Okay, Dam Sunshine!" they replied in unison and bounded inside heading to the kitchen.

With his pups out-of-sight, he let go of his tale and allowed it to wigwag in circles over his head. Carulin drooped her tail.

"I sorry I scare you, mate of Birch," she chittered quietly. "You no need to stay. Your pups are safe with me. I no harm pups."

"I can no leave pups alone," he replied.

Carulin flicked her tail up and down once. "You good sire. Come, join us. You can help your pups clean cherries."

He hesitated for a brief moment and then followed the biggen into the tree. He found his three pups nibbling on cherries.

"We can no resist, sire," Cherry said for the three of them. "Cherries so good!"

He glanced at Carulin.

She gigglechittered. "My pup, Energy, eat several while he help me clean and pit cherries in summers past. I always make sure to have more cherries then need. Come, you need to wash your paws just like your pups." She showed him the sink, which he recognized from the one in the emergency shelter, washed his front paws and joined his pups. Carulin placed two large wooden bowls in front of them. She pointed to one, "Put stems and pits in here." She then pointed to the other, "Put cherries in here."

She then joined in with them and they cleaned and pitted cherries for a while. Once the bowl was filled, she moved it over the counter, dumped it in a large pot and brought the bowl back over. "When you fill this again, stop."

"Okay!" the pups replied. They nibbled one cherry for every five or so they cleaned and pitted.

Meanwhile, Carulin opened a jar of honey and added a few spoonfuls to the pot and stirred.

“It’s full!” the pups cried out.

Carulin bowed in thanks as she retrieved it. The pups followed her over near the stove.

“You need to stand back a little,” she warned them. “This biggen cooking tool. It get very hot like fire. It could burn and cook you just like it will cook the cherries. Must always be careful near cooking tool.”

Their sire helped keep them back a little bit. He nervously wigwagged his tail.

Carulin added some more honey to the pot and the rest of the cherries. She stirred it as it heated-up. The pups could feel the heat from where they stood back.

“The honey is why it tastes sweet. It needed to help preserve the cherries,” she explained as she added the rest of the jar of honey to the pot and kept stirring. The scent of cherries and honey filled the kitchen. The pups and their sire nibbled more cherries while watching Carulin cook down the honey/cherry mix. It began to bubble. “Not long now,” she said over her shoulder at her watchers. “I’ll show you.”

She tilted the pot so they could see how the cherries had melted down and combined with the honey. They stared in wonder as it bubbled. She reached into the freezer, pulled out a plate and dribbled a little of the steaming mixture onto it. She placed it back in the freezer and moved the pot off the hot burner. After a couple ceklicks passed, she pulled the plate back out to show them.

“This test to see if jam is ready,” she explained and nudged the dollop with one of her claws. It wobbled making the pups giggle. “It wiggles, is ready. Now I fill,” she switched to Common for the next word, “jars.” They looked at her. She thought for a moment. “Biggen tool for storing jam.” She showed them one of the clear glass containers.

She lined ten up on the counter. Placed a funnel in one and spooned the hot, steaming cherry mixture into it. She quickly moved the funnel from jar to jar. She then wiped the tops of the jars with a cloth and placed a cover on each. She then used jar tongs to lower them into a larger pot with steaming water in it. She covered the pot and increased the heat until steam caused the lid to wobble a little. The pups watched through all this in fascination. It was one thing to have Elder Voice Friend explain Biggens cooked their food. It was another to actually watch one do it.

“Dame Sunshine?” Bright Eyes asked and paused until he had her attention. “Where did the rest of the cherries go. We clean enough to fill this,” he pointed to the bowl, “two times. What you put in those things would no fill it one time.”

Carulin smiled. “Is good question. I no know if I can give answer in chitterspeak well. I try.” As she replied, the lid on the water bath pot wobbled some more as steam escaped from it. “If you heat water up enough it turn into air. That is why cover wobbles now. There is a lot of water in cherries. As I cook cherries, water in cherries turn into air. Is why it smell so much of cherries

here as I cook cherries. Once in jars, I cook cherries more. Jars will seal, keep air out. With no air, cherries take long, long time to go bad.”

Enough time had gone by. Using mitts, she removed the lid from the water bath pot. She then pulled the jars out with tongs and set them at the far end of the counter on a wire rack to cool.

“You no touch jars. Very hot. Will burn you. We have something to eat and then time to clean more cherries. I show you some biggen food.”

Carulin reached on the other counter and pulled open a door on a small box and removed a loaf of bread from within. She brought it to the table to show the pups and their sire.

“Biggens call this,” she switched to Common for the next word, “bread. Sniff.”

All four of the cousin squirrels did so, both the pups and their sire.

“Smell a little like butternuts,” Red said.

Carulin flicked her tail up and down once. “If you cook butternuts and dry them, you can grind them into powder. Mix powder with other things and cook again and you can make bread.” She reached in a drawer and pulled-out a serrated knife. “This tool like our claws but longer. Is very sharp. You no put your paws near bread while I cut it with tool.” She cut a couple slices off the loaf. She then cut the slices into smaller pieces. “Take one and nibble a little and tell me what you think.”

The three pups did so. Their sire followed suit after hesitating a moment.

“Taste a little like butternuts, but soft,” Brighteyes said.

Cherry wigwagged her tail up and down once, adding, “Is a little dry.”

Carulin wigwagged her tail up and down once in agreement. “Yes. Now, remember how I told you yesterday we put jam on other food to make it taste better?” She scrapped the remaining just cooked jam out of the pot and spread it on their bread slices. “Try that.”

The muzzles of all four cousin squirrels lit-up. It made it taste so much better.

“I see you like that.” Carulin reached into another cabinet and pulled out a jar with a light brown substance in it. She opened the lid. “Smell this.”

All four were surprised by the smell. “Is butternuts,” their sire stated as he began to relax in the presence of the biggen squirrel.

Carulin wigwagged her tail up and down once. “If you no cook butternuts and just grind them you get this. We call it butternut,” she switched to Common for the next word, “butter.” She spread some on another piece of bread for each of them. “Try that.”

All four loved it. “Is real good!” Cherry exclaimed.

“Good. Now, take the two pieces of bread and place them together like this.” Carulin sandwiched a slice with jam and a slice with butternutbutter together. “And try that.”

She watched the reaction on their muzzles. They liked it too much to say anything as they quickly ate through their BB&J sandwiches. Some of the filling squeezed out onto their paws, which they licked clean. The three pups asked for more. Carulin glanced to their sire for permission.

“They growing pups, always hungry,” he responded flicking his tail up and down once.

“And you?” Carulin raised her tail in a curl.

“I no need more,” he replied and bowed slightly in thanks.