

Blossom hugged Saniel. “Good luck on the exam tomorrow.”

“Best of luck with your father these next few days, too,” he replied, nuzzling her briefly.

They disengaged and Blossom joined her father. She looked about. “How come you haven’t summoned a hovercraft yet, Father?”

“We will go to the village first,” Aldin replied as he started off through the tree branches. He quickly increased the pace, but Blossom easily kept up with him. “It’s unusual among Biggen settlements, Blossom,” he continued as they made their way from branch to branch. “No predator species. You can get in some practice there before we head onto Rock City. We also need to check-in briefly with Dr. Neroff.”

Blossom darted a little ahead of Aldin and stopped on a branch, blocking his way unless he changed directions. He landed next to her and paused. “Why do we need to see Dr. Neroff?” She asked, raising her tail briefly in a curl.

“We need to get you a referral to a specialist in Rock City.”

“Why?”

Aldin gently grasped her forepaws in his. “Senior school attendees are required to have a contraceptive implant unless they have a medical waiver.”

“I saw that in the paperwork.” She looked down a moment drooping her tail and then looked back up at her father. “I wish I had seen that before Saniel and I promised you, mother, and his parents we’d wait until he was an adult before we become mates.”

Aldin nervously gigglechattered. “You’re growing up so fast, my daughter. Should you two chose to become mates at school while it’s safe to do so, that’s your and his business.”

“Really?”

Aldin again flicked his tail up and down once.

She hugged him tightly. As she pulled out of the embrace, she asked, “That’s what you and mother were discussing early this morning, wasn’t it?”

“Partially. Our concern is that you’re too young for a contraceptive implant, Blossom. It’s why we need to get you a medical waiver. It has to come from a specialist doctor, one who concentrates on reproduction. And you can’t just scamper into a specialist’s office. You need a referral first.”

“Okay. What about once I reach sexual maturity mid-winter?”

“If you wish to receive the implant, we can have the waiver lifted then and you can have the implant. Your mother still doesn’t understand why Biggens choose to mate without wanting pups to take. Theirs is a different society from ours with different rules.”

Blossom was silent in thought for a moment. “Yes, Biggens are different. However, it makes sense to me, Father.” She cocked her head at an angle while looking at him. “Well, sort of. It would be hard to keep attending senior school or college if you have pups who need to be cared for.”

“To quote Teacher, ‘You are wise beyond your seasons, my child.’” He smiled at her and pointed the way towards the village with his tail. “Shall we keep going?”

“Lead the way, Father.”

Dr. Neroff had no hesitations in providing the needed referral, though he was surprised to learn Blossom had already been accepted into senior school. Blossom got some practice interacting with some of the villagers. Her instincts screamed at her to flee from some, especially the huge to her beaver shop keeper, but somehow, she was able to tamp it down until they were no longer in front of her. Then she fled up the nearest tree screeing in fear. Her father joined her soon after. To her surprise, he remained calm.

Once she calmed down, he pulled an earbud out of one of his ears before she could ask. “They are programmed to cancel out the sound of a warning scree, Blossom. I surprised your mother the first time she called out like you and I didn’t react to it.”

“How long have you used those, Father?”

“I only use them when I’m helping a fellow squirrel learn how to interact with Biggens. This is the first time I’ve had to put them in since last summer.”

Blossom drooped her tail. “I failed and you didn’t answer my question.”

“Nonsense, you did well. You’re not going to be able to suppress your fear instincts instantly and completely, my daughter. It’s going to take more practice. And it’s better to get that practice in now before you start senior school.” Aldin grabbed his flatpanel and summoned a hovercraft. “I think we’ve spent enough time here. It’s two clicks to Rock City. I’ll talk about why I started using the earbuds on our way there.” He glanced at a message and drooped his tail. “And it looks like we’ll be there a couple of days. The earliest the specialist can see you is the morning after tomorrow.”