

Blossom wasted little time upon their return and quickly found Saniel. She pulled a peach out of the backpack to show him, telling him about the two trees near the school. His jaw dropped as he gave her the word in Common for the peach.

“They don’t normally grow around here. The winters are too cold and long.”

They shared the peach. Instead of dropping the pit, Blossom tucked it back in the pack. Saniel looked at her.

“In studying for the exam, I read how some Biggens breed new plant species. Maybe these peaches are like that and have been bred to withstand our winters. There’s one way to find out. We’ll save the pits and go plant them by the nearest cherry grove in what had been smart squirrel territory before The Refuge was created. Come, I want to share some with my brothers.”

Saniel drooped his tail. “I can join you later, but there are chores I must do for my parents right now. There is a lot of preparation to do before the butternut harvest in a few weeks. And we won’t be here to help then.”

“Alright.” They hugged briefly and Blossom made her way through the treetops in search of her siblings.

That evening in their shared drey, both Pinecone and Butternut drifted to sleep quickly. Aldin snuggled down between the two of them but remained awake. All three were, in turn, snuggled-up to Raoul in the oversize drey. He flinched slightly in startlement as Raoul gently brushed a paw through his fur. He didn’t dare do more than that for fear of waking up the other two.

“What is wrong, my potential mate brother?” Raoul asked quietly. “You seem wound-up.” Raoul patiently waited for a reply as Aldin was silent a moment in thought.

“I don’t know where to start, Raoul. I was expecting a short visit. Of course, I haven’t been a very good host so far, immediately leaving on business soon after you two arrived.” He sighchittered. “So much change, so quickly. I don’t know if I’m ready for this so soon. I figured you two would be here a few weeks and then go home. Then come next winter’s Parliament, you two would host me, Butternut would pull off her trick again, except she’d lead me off into the trees. She’d get her pups and...”

“And you’d be torn between two families. Maybe this is a better solution?”

Again, Aldin was silent for a moment in thought. “Yes, perhaps. I just didn’t expect this much change in the short time I was away in Rock City. I know we spoke your visit could be longer, but I feel caught off guard as I didn’t expect you two to quickly decide to move here.”

“Neither was I, but I had plans in place just in case. The Council of Elders, particularly Foxy, seemed to have other plans. While our great grandpups were helping me build this drey, Butternut spoke about her life story in brief at a meeting of many of the other squirrels here. That planted an idea in Foxy. Then when you and Blossom left, Foxy and Tassel approached Butternut asking her to stay and become a teacher. She’s all in on it. I haven’t seen her this happy and lively since...” he trailed off a moment in thought. “Well, since before the accident that changed her into a cousin smart squirrel.” He paused again in thought. “I think it will all work out in the end one way or another. Butternut briefed you on this morning’s meeting with the local education board. They’ve already asked to meet with us again tomorrow. I’m surprised at how quick the follow-up is. Right now, you need to relax and rest, potential mate brother. Butternut will want you present and alert.”

“I know I need to sleep. But there is so much racing through my head. It is hard to relax.”

“If you will allow me, Aldin, there is something I have done from time to time to help Butternut to relax since her return from Teacher’s old forest.” Again, he gently brushed one of his paws through Aldin’s fur across his back. This time, Aldin didn’t flinch. As he also didn’t protest about it, Raoul continued to gently pet him, kneading one paw into the back of his neck between the shoulders and then lightly stroking down his back. After a few ceclicks of being gently petted, Aldin relaxed and quickly fell asleep.