

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. Sanial and a skunk soon joined them. Sanial introduced the skunk as his roommate, Drexle. As they ate, they made small talk. Throughout, Moselyn kept glancing towards Sanial, 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, 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. Sanial 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. Sanial 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."

Sanial 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 click 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 giggled. “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 giggled. “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 giggled. “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 Saniel 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 Saniel 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.