

FIVE

Saniel didn't spend long in his room as Drexle wasn't there, which he was thankful for as he didn't want to spend a lot of time talking to the skunk at the moment. There was someone else he felt he needed to talk to. He grabbed his backpack and headed back outside. He looked about and slipped into the forest a little way away from the far end of the school as he didn't want Blossom to see him, whether she was outside or looking out of her room. He then worked his way back to the portion of Blossom's territory where they had encountered Brave. From there, he climbed through the tree canopy until the school was barely out of site. He chose an oak laden with acorns and moved further up into the canopy. He wiggled off the pack, hung it on a branch and began harvesting acorns placing them in the pack. He made sure he was noisy as he did so. It got the desired effect he wanted.

"Chit! Chatter! Invader! My territory! Lea..." Brave trailed off mid-word as he skidded to a halt on the branch directly in front of Saniel. He chittered nervously as he faced the Biggen squirrel.

Saniel continued to harvest acorns, placing them in the now half-filled knapsack, but he did so quietly. "Hello Brave," he chittered as he continued while wigwagging his tail in greeting. "We have a small problem. Your Elder give Blossom all forest in site of Biggen learning place." Saniel leaned out a bit on a branch a little too small for his weight and it sagged down a bit. He pointed with his tail through the resulting opening. One could barely see the top of the school through the opening. He glanced back at Brave as he placed another acorn in the pack, not slowing down. "Why would your Elder give your territory to another squirrel, one who is small biggen? Have you done something that he chose to punish you for by taking your territory from you?" Saniel briefly raised his tail in a curl.

Brave stared at the top of the building through the opening in the canopy. Saniel moved back to a more solid part of the branch and closed the backpack. He wiggled it on.

Brave chattered angrily. "Those my acorns! I will bite you, Energy! Biggen or no Biggen!"

"Yes, these are yours. Show me were to take them."

Brave stared at Saniel. "What you mean?"

"Blossom is worried. She fear you will freeze-starve if you continue to try and gather nuts for her rather than work on gathering for yourself. How long did it take to bring what you did to her hollow? Maybe a pawspan¹ of time?"

Brave flicked his tail up and down once and lowered his head a moment as he felt shame for some reason. Why was this Biggen here to rub it into his fur that Blossom had chosen him despite how hard Brave had worked?

¹ Pawspan-about one hour/klick

“And it was about the same amount of nuts as I’ve just spent a finger-claw time gathering into my backpack here, right?” He pointed to the pack with his tail. “It is harvest time, Brave. And winter comes fast here. Let me help you a little. I can give you two,” he held up two claws, “pawspans of time.”

“Why?”

“I angry with your Elder. How he treat Blossom and you. Putting you in the same territory. Is no right, Brave. I know he no like Biggens. I see he test Blossom. Why he angry with you? Why else he give your territory or part of it to Blossom? We need to speak and I can harvest nuts and speak at same time. Same you?”

Brave flicked his tail up and down once and then it drooped. “Come I show you where place acorns. Speak on way.” Saniel followed him. “Elder is sire of dame,” he stated as they made their way deeper into his territory and towards a large oak tree. He looked about briefly and showed Saniel a hollow on the far side.

Saniel wiggled off his pack and dumped the contents through the opening.

Brave lowered his voice to nearly a whisper. “I no know why he mad at me now. Maybe still mad after I lead other elder to him early last winter. He come with,” he held up two claws, “other squirrels.” He held up one claw, “who I now know is sire of Blossom. Is mean he give part my territory to Blossom. I abide by rule of Elder though is no fair. She...” he hesitated a moment.

“is kind, caring, beautiful, and female.” Saniel propped quietly.

Brave flicked his tail up and down once and sighchittered. “And she choose a Biggen as her potential mate.”

“I no expect her to choose me, Brave. I am a Biggen. My family live more like big smart squirrels than biggens. I can no give her pups. But she chose me anyway. Come, we harvest more nuts. No time to just sit and speak. Can speak and harvest at same time.”

He let Brave lead the way to whichever tree he wanted them to harvest next. It turned out to be the same oak Saniel had started in. He wiggled the backpack off again, hooked it on a branch and opened it. Brave gazed inside it.

“This useful Biggen tool. It take me more than handsan time to bring that many acorns to nearest hollow. This so big I fit in it.” He gathered acorns with Saniel.

“I could get you a smaller one that fit you, Brave,” Saniel offered.

Brave drooped his tale and then wigwagged it left to right and back once. “No, that would make Elder very angry. He no like Biggen things.”

Saniel shrugged. "Very well," he tossed acorns into the pack at a rapid rate. "Blossom does like you, Brave. Is why she grant you truce. Well, truce through me because of your Elder. But she can no choose you, at least not right now."

Brave stared at him, pausing in harvesting acorns.

"What you mean?"

"She is forbidden by your Elder to speak of our forest. Is why I speak about it this morning as your Elder no forbid me. Well, no forbid me yet. As I speak, things are different there. Smart squirrels, small biggens and biggens all live together always in truce like in winter storm." The backpack being full again, Saniel closed the top and wiggled it on. This time, he led Brave back to the hollow. "We all work together, make colony stronger. We take in smart squirrels and others who have no other home or chose to come there on own." He emptied the pack again and started back towards the other oak.

"My dame and sire and Blossom's no wanted us to be potential mates at first. They scared for us."

"Because you Biggen and she no Biggen."

Saniel flicked his tail up and down once as he wiggled off the backpack again.

"Biggens know many things. But no know if Biggen and smart squirrel can make pups. What if pups take? Would they be Biggens? Smart squirrels? What would happen to Blossom if they Biggen? Biggen pups this big," Saniel held his paws apart nearly half Brave's body length, "when born. Biggen pups take two seasons to grow in female once they take."

Brave eyes widened as he chittered and wigwagged his tail in distress. "Blossom no live to birth pups that big!" he blurted out.

Saniel wigwagged his tail left to right and back and then it drooped. "No, she would no live. Is why our dames and sires scared that we potential mates."

"You will no couple when she see next winter?"

Saniel gigglechittered. "That will be up to her. This winter she turns one." He held up a single claw. "This will be my ten and three," he held up all ten claws and then three more" winter." He continued to harvest acorns the entire time they spoke.

Brave's eyes shot wide. "You older than Elder!"

"Biggens take longer to grow and live longer than smart squirrels. I still pup, Brave. Seeing ten and two," he held-up ten and then two claws, "winters is like you seeing one. I will be pup until I see three more winters after this one."

“You just speak you can no sire pups with Blossom. Too dangerous. Would you still let her lead you on chase?”

“If she chose lead my on chase, I would chase. It would be safe right now. We can no have pups while at Biggen learning place. Biggen healer give us...” Saniel paused. “I know no how to describe it. Chitterspeak have less words than Biggenspeak. Special herbs, poke in arm like wasp sting. Special herbs keeps pups from taking if we couple. Once she turns one, it would be safe for her to lead me on chase. If we couple, no pups take. But we would then be mates per smart squirrel rules. Is a little different among Biggens.”

“Can no have pups while learn Biggen things?”

Saniel wiggled the pack on again and flicked his tail up and down once. “I speak on it briefly this morning. How long it take your Elder teach elder things to other squirrel?”

“I ask sire of dame that when I was pup. He speak it take many winters.”

“And if that squirrel has pups?”

Brave’s eyes widened in understanding. “No time learn. Must tend to pups.”

Saniel flicked his tail up and down once as he turned to make his way back to the hollow. Brave leapt in front of Sanial barring his way. “We go different hollow this time. I like layer acorns and butternuts in my stash.”

Saniel followed him and emptied his backpack again. He let Brave lead him to a butternut tree near the original oak and the harvest continued.

“Brave, as I speak before, our colony is different. We have two females, littermates who come from different forest. One with more females than males. They catch eye of two males. Both liked both males. Rather than force one to choose one over other, they agree, all four, to become mates. Our Elders quickly rule can share mates.”

“Why you speak this?”

“I agreed that when time comes, we will find another smart squirrel so Blossom can grow pups as I must no sire pups with her. Is why our dames and sires allow us to be potential mates.” He saw Brave look at him. “But, it will be three to four,” he held-up three and then four claws, “winters before that can happen. It take long time to learn Biggen things at Biggen learning place.”

“Is long time to wait,” Brave replied as he drooped his tail.

Saniel flicked his tail up and down once as he harvested butternuts. “Blossom likes you, Brave. You harvest nuts for her. You no back down when I show you how big I really am. If no find other female in that time, you are patient, are willing to wait that long time, remain a good friend

to us in that time, and are willing to leave this forest and join our colony, I will share Blossom with you. That's a lot, I know..oooffff!"

Saniel was cut off mid-word as he nearly lost his footing as Brave barreled him over in a bearhug or at least the best the smaller squirrel could attempt with Saniel. Brave nuzzled him in his excitement. He would have to wait, but waiting would be worth it. He would have the wonderful Blossom, though he'd have to share her.

The rest of the time flew by quickly as Saniel explained about The Refuge to Brave as they continued to harvest acorns and butternuts. At the end of the second handspan of time Brave stared in disbelief at the filled hollow. They had filled both the hollows he had shown to Saniel and part of a third. What they had gathered in two handspans using the Biggen tool called a backpack would have taken him many days. It was a very useful time-saving tool. He no longer understood why Elder forbid it.

Brave offered to hug Saniel again. The larger squirrel embraced him. "I can't thank you enough. I like this truce."

"It is what we do in our colony, Brave. We help each other. And as I speak at the start, Blossom was worried about you after seeing what you did for her. She knows winters are long here. She and I start learning Biggen things tomorrow. We will not be free to harvest more nuts for the next five" Saniel held-up five fingers, "days."

Brave wigwagged his tail in concern. "How do you hope to gather enough food for winter even with a backpack if no time while you learn Biggen things?"

Saniel giggled. "Biggen teaching Elders care for us. We are still pups. There is enough food for us. There are several ten tens Biggen pups here to learn." He held up all ten fingers ten times.

Brave whistled at the thought of so many Biggens in one place, but the learning place was very big.

"Food is provided so we can spend all time learning. So, you do not try to gather any more nuts for Blossom. Just for you. We do not starve in Biggen learning place. What we gather is extra just in case."