

SIX

“Where have you been?” Blossom asked him just as he returned to his room. She looked him up and down. “I smell Brave on you. You didn’t hurt him, did you?” Her tail wigwagged back and forth in agitation.

“What? No! I helped him gather nuts for the past two hours,” Saniel replied, shaking the backpack off his back, pulling a single butternut out, and offering it to her. “He insisted I take one back to give to you.”

“You helped him?”

Saniel looked down briefly and scuffed a footpaw. “Well, I wanted to talk to him and it is harvest time. I didn’t want to take away from that, so I helped him gather butternuts and acorns for the winter. I told him about The Refuge and how it came to be. How things are different there. What he’d be getting himself into should he be willing to wait and succeed at getting you to chose him as second mate. Thing...Ooofff!”

She pounced him, giving him a similar bearhug to the one Brave had given him. The butternut was knocked out of his handpaw and rolled a little way on the floor. “I knew I chose correctly when I had asked to share your drey this summer. You are not selfish,” she paused, “even if you can be a bit overprotective at times.”

Saniel drooped his tail. “I’m sorry, Butternut. It’s hard to not be protective.”

“Is The Refuge all you talked about and what he can expect?”

Saniel wigwagged his tail left to right and back again. “No, I was wondering if he knew why his Elder may be upset with him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, probably a third, if not nearly half the territory you were given was part of his territory.”

“WHAT!?!” Again, her tail wigwagged in irritation.

“He is the grandson of this forest’s Elder. He led your parents and Elder Teacher to the Elder last winter. This had been one of the last forests they visited before returning to what is now The Refuge.”

“And this Elder doesn’t like Biggens.” Blossom drooped her tail. “And you told him all about The Refuge. If his grandfather learns, he might be chased out of the forest for trusting a Biggen. We’ll have to help him move to The Refuge if that happens.”

“This forest’s elder would do that to his own grandpup during this time of year?” Saniel asked in disbelief.

“I only met this Elder once, Saniel, and I wouldn’t put it past him. He’s mean. I think he only talked to Father and I because we brought a backpack of butternuts to him. When I interrupted him one time, I think he would have bit me if Father wasn’t right there.”

She picked up the butternut that Saniel had dropped and audibly cracked it with her teeth and nibbled on the sweat buttery nut within. She bit off a chunk and offered it to Saniel, who accepted it.

“You don’t know how much I wish I could do that with my teeth,” he said before eating the piece she had offered him. She quickly finished the rest. She gathered the shell fragments to toss outdoors later.

“I know,” she replied. “Anyway, we can worry about Brave later. For now, we have a dinner date.”

“What?”

“We leave in 50 ceclicks. You, me, Moselyn, Drexle, and maybe one other. Drexle wasn’t sure if the other student could join us on short notice. We’re going to Jochen’s Restaurant, which is just a short scamper away.”

“Jochen’s....Jochen’s...why does that sound vaguely familiar?”

“He is a partner with Father. He makes Teran pizza.”

“Teran pizza?! I’m in. Aldin made that for us once last winter and I loved it. I guess I have just enough time to freshen up, huh?”

Blossom picked a twig out of his fur. “Or at least get the worst of the twigs out.” She gigglechattered as she licked him lightly on the nose tip.

Jochen’s was very busy, but there was a table ready for their group of five, two citizen squirrels, one cousin squirrel, and two citizen skunks. The other skunk was Drexle’s girlfriend, Hersah, he had met in primary school that was shared between his and her villages. A spotted skunk, she was a year ahead of him at the school and very excited to meet the others, especially Blossom.

Jochen arrived at their table and presented flatpanel menus. “Well, Ms. Busheytail, you’re back again, and brought friends, I see.”

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once. “Yes, Mr. Jochen. I invited them to try some Terran pizza.” She looked at the others. “Are you willing to trust me in the choice?”

“Sure, I’m game,” Drexle responded.

“I know it’ll be great,” Saniel replied. “The Ambassador made me some once.”

“I’ve been here and have had it before. I can’t wait,” Hersah replied.

Moselyn hesitated. “I don’t want to sound impolite or stupid. But what is it?”

Jochen pointed to the next table over that was just being served. “I’m not sure how to describe it to those who haven’t had it.” Some at the table waved to Hersah, recognizing her as they were returning students like her. Hersah waived back as Moselyn observed the others dig in.

“Alright, sure, I’ll give it a try.”

Jochen turned again to Blossom. “So, what will it be?”

“Surprise us, Mr. Jochen, and bring a big pot of herbal tea.” She looked again at the others. “Do any of you want something else to drink other than tea?”

All agreed tea would be fine.

Jochen collected the flatpanels and quickly returned with a tray carrying a pot of tea and five mugs, one smaller than the others. He poured tea for each of them and let them be. They made small talk for a while. Quicker than expected, a waiter set a giant 30 cemit¹ steaming hot pizza on the center of their table. There were round vegetable protein sausage pieces on it along with mushrooms. It smelled wonderful as all their noses began to twitch. Blossom and Hersah showed the others how to serve themselves and warned them to let it cool. They didn’t need the warning based on the steam that wafted from their slices. While the slices cooled, the waiter returned with a large bowl of salad and five smaller bowls. The salad was divided up and enjoyed while they waited for the pizza to cool.

Saniel bit into his slice and his eyes widened as he chewed. “This is probably better than the one the Ambassador made last winter!”

“I heard that,” Jochen called from across the way. “Thank you.”

Drexle’s eyes also lit-up as he bit into his slice. Rather than comment, he continued eating his slice quickly.

Moselyn sniffed at hers and took a little nibble. Her eyes widened as she took a bigger bite. Once she swallowed, she said, “I don’t know why I was so hesitant. This is excellent!”

¹ Cemit-centimeter. 30 cemits is roughly 12 inches.

The pizza had been sliced into ten slices, which prevented any debate about who would get the last slice as all were able to have two. Two of the slices were smaller than the others, which Blossom assumed were hers.

When they were finished, Jochen presented them the bill on a flatpanel. Blossom stared at the amount and turned to him. “Mr. Jochen, this isn’t correct. There’s no charge for the pizza here. Just the salad and tea.”

“I know you and the others have a tight budget, most likely small allowances from your parents. And your father is my partner, Ms. Blossom.”

Blossom looked at the others briefly while wigwagging her tail in agitation. “I don’t care if he’s your partner. It’s not fair to you.”

Jochen leaned into their table and spoke in a lower voice so as to not be overheard at the other nearby tables. “You asked me to surprise you. My cook crew messed up a pizza order for another table. They used a butternut crust when they were supposed to use a wheat crust. It was already a business write-off. If you had not said to surprise you, that pizza would have gone to waste. Next time, I promise you there will be no discount. Please accept it this time.”

“Very well, Mr. Jochen and thank you.” Blossom replied, placing her palm on the flatpanel. It flashed from purple to green.

“Hey!” Drexle protested. “Shouldn’t we split the bill?”

“Next time. I’m the one who invited all of you, so my treat. And it’s not that much really with the pizza being free.”