

TWENTY-ONE

“Are you sure you want to take that lab?” Saniel asked. “It’s optional.”

“Yes, Saniel, I feel I need to take it. I learned a lot in the virtual dissection lab, but I think I’ll learn more cutting-open an actual body.”

“They use live small rodents, Blossom.”

Blossom drooped her tail. “I know. It’s rare that they receive a cadaver donation. Those usually go to medical schools. I’ll just have to eat it after.”

“That’s your choice, love. I’ve had small rodent a few times when Dad or Mom or I have caught and killed them trying to build nests in our storage rooms. We ate them as we killed them.” Saniel made a face of distaste. “It bothered me each time, but I understood why it needed to be done. I just hope you don’t regret it.”

“I know, but how am I going to be able to become a doctor if I don’t get my paws dirty digging into an actual body?”

Saniel nodded. “I won’t be around for lunch. I’m helping the local smart squirrels with their fall harvest with permission of Schoolmaster Pekan.”

Blossom hugged Saniel. “That’s so thoughtful of you.”

“Blossom, are you sure you wish to go through with this?” the wolf biology teacher asked. “This lab is usually only taken by predator species.”

“Squirrels are omnivores, Ms. Trenchworth. I feel I need to do this.”

The wolf nodded. “Very well. You will team-up with Stacker,” the wolf pointed to a fox.

Blossom move over by the fox who nodded. “If you find you can’t eat the remains when we’re done dissecting it, I’ll eat it.”

“The rules of my colony are very specific, Stacker. If you kill and it is not in self-defense, you must eat your kill. I will eat what I can. I appreciate the offer of help.”

“My father taught me the same rules when he taught me to hunt. If you kill it, you must eat it.”

Ms. Trenchworth went to the front of the classroom. “Each pair of you will work as a team and retrieve a small rodent from the cage. Once back at your lab desk, you will place the rodent in the provided tube and gas it to kill it. Then you will dissect it, labelling the various organs. Once I’m satisfied with your work, you may eat your kill. Remember that. If you take the life of a cousin creature, you should honor that kill by eating it. Any questions?” She paused a moment. When no questions were asked, she said, “Go to it.”

Stacker grabbed a small rodent and carried it back to the lab table. Blossom held the tube while Stacker placed the struggling rodent in it. Blossom covered the opening with a stopper and hose and turned on the gas. Invisible carbon monoxide filled the tube. They waited for the rodent to stop moving/breathing.

“Please forgive us, little one,” Blossom whispered. “We will learn from you and your body will not go to waste.” She wiped a couple tears away.

Once they were sure the rodent was dead, Stacker removed it from the tube and pinned it down in the tray, torso/belly up.

“He was male,” Stacker stated.

“All the small rodents for this are male,” Ms. Trenchworth stated as she was passing by as she worked her way around the room to check on each student’s progress. “That’s to ensure we don’t kill any unborn young.”

Blossom used a scalpel to carefully cut the rodent open and expose the organs. She and Stacker carefully removed the still warm organs, labeling each one correctly. Blossom was surprised there wasn’t more blood than there was. Ms. Trenchworth nodded at the correct labeling as she passed by again. Blossom then carefully split open one of the rear legs to look at the muscle structure. She repeated the process on one of the fore legs.

“What are you doing?” Ms. Trenchworth asked.

“Some extra personal study, Ms. Trenchworth. While we were to just identify the internal organs, I thought as it has died for us to learn, I could also look at and learn of how its muscle structure works prior to us eating the remains.” Blossom pointed out and identified each muscle group in the lower leg to Ms. Trenchworth.

“Very good. You two are done. Excellent work.”

Blossom cut off the rear leg she had cut open and nibbled on the raw meat. Her nose wrinkled in disgust and she found it difficult to fight back the tears that she had been mostly holding back.

“Maybe you’d prefer it cooked,” Stacker suggested as he lit a small lab burner. He started to roast the other rear leg, fur and all holding it over the flame with tweezers. The fur singed off and the skin crackled as the meat sizzled in the flame.

Blossom's nose began to twitch. The leg Stacker was roasting smelled familiar. She mimicked him using another set of tweezers. Yes, that smell was familiar, but she couldn't quite place it. When the fox pulled his rodent leg off the burner, Blossom followed suit. She nibbled at it again. This time, it was tolerable. The meat had a slightly nutty flavor to it. Her eyes shot wide.

"It tastes like the sausage slices at Jochen's!" she blurted out. "Except those are plant-based."

Stacker giggled. "Not necessarily. They offer both plant-based and meat-based sausage slices. And small rodents are plentiful and a nuisance if not culled often. Grind-up the meat and they make a good sausage." He ate all of the leg he had cooked, bone and all, which crunched loudly. She stared at him and fought down the fear that was screaming at her to flee. Her tail wigwagged nervously. He shrugged. "My digestive track can handle small bones as I learned when my father taught me to hunt." When Blossom finished picking off all the meat of the leg bone she had cooked, Stacker offered to eat the bone. She let him. Her tail continued to wigwag nervously. It didn't help that she could hear bones cracking throughout the lab.

They cooked the forelegs the same way and ate those.

"Do you think you've eaten enough to meet the rules of your colony, Blossom?" Stacker asked.

"Yes, I think so. Also, I don't think I could eat much more anyway."

"Then do you mind if I eat the rest so it doesn't go to waste?"

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once. "Yes, go ahead. Thank you."

Stacker gobbled the rest of the remains in one bite.

"I need to leave. Do you mind finishing the clean-up?"

"No, not at all. You were a good lab partner. Thank you."

Blossom bolted out the nearest exit and raced up the nearest tree crying out in fear. She had barely kept it together in the lab. All those predators crunching on bones near her. Her instincts cried out at her to flee and she barely kept it together long enough to see that her rodent was completely consumed. Once she calmed down a bit, she curled up on the branch and began to weep over what she had done. She had learned a lot but was the price worth it as Sanial had warned her? And she realized she liked the taste of the cooked rodent meat and that bothered her even more.

She wasn't sure how long she lay there curled-up weeping when she felt the branch she was on wiggle. Someone else was coming. She opened her eyes and looked up at the new Elder and sat up.

"My pup's potential mate, Blossom, what's wrong? Others hear you cry-out and I come to see why."

"Elder, is hard explain. Is hard being both smart squirrel and small Biggen. Today I in class where all others were Biggen predators."

"You are my pup's potential mate, Blossom. You may call me Dame if you wish. I see how that would be hard. I have all I can do to no flee from your Biggen Teaching Elder, the fisher, when I must speak to him."

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once and then explained as best she could what happened in the lab. She broke down crying at the end. To her surprise, Brave's mother pulled her into a loving hug and let her cry herself out. Brave's mother gently stroked her back fur much as her own mother would do.

"Is very difficult thing you learn today, Blossom."

"I killed a small rodent."

"And you ate your kill as required by rules of your forest and ours."

"Biggen Fox helped me."

"That's alright. You ate what you could. And I think you will no do that again any time soon, right?"

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once. "Yes, I will no kill again if I can help it."

"Then you learn a lot today. Go, before Biggen Teaching Elder worry you missing. I also need to return to guide the Biggen squirrels helping us with the harvest."

"Thank you, second Dame," Blossom replied, hugging her one more time before climbing down and returning to the school.

The Elder smiled as she watched Blossom race back into the Biggen learning place. She would make a good, caring mate for her pup.