

TWENTY-TWO

Blossom returned to the lab to find all the other students were long gone. Ms. Trenchworth was at her desk. She looked up.

“Welcome back, Blossom. Are you alright now?”

Blossom grabbed her tail to keep it under control. “Yes, Ms. Trenchworth. I just felt I needed to come back and apologize.”

“Your lab partner cleaned-up and everyone in the class understood why soon after you left abruptly.”

“Really?”

The wolf pointed to the open window facing the forest.

“I keep one open in case a student gets sick. They all heard your cry of distress. I watched the other squirrel come by and comfort you. Again, are you really alright?”

“I am now. My instincts are closer to the surface, then they are for citizen species, Ms. Trenchworth. All the crunching of small rodent bones by my lab mates triggered my fear instinct. I needed to flee and climb and cry out a warning. The squirrel you saw is the local elder. She comforted me and we talked it out. Yes, I really am fine now. I’m willing to come back after a different lab and help clean-up.”

The wolf nodded. “That’s alright. No need to do that. You did pass the lab. The school has a counselor if you find later on you need more assistance.”

“Thank you, Ms. Trenchworth.” Blossom bowed and left.

Blossom pushed the cart with her lunch on it from the serving line into the cafeteria. It had been provided for her after that first meal so she didn’t have to rely on others to carry her tray for her. She had less on it than usual. She was still a little full from eating the two limbs of the small rodent that morning.

“Hey, Blossom! Come join us!”

Blossom looked towards Stacker the fox. He was at a round table with another fox, a pine marten, and a dog. She realized the others had been in the lab.

“Are you sure?” Blossom asked as she wheeled her cart over to their table, which was set at a comfortable height for them.

“Please,” Stacker replied as the other three nodded. The female dog’s tail wagged as she offered to lower the table.

“No, leave it at a height that is comfortable for you,” she responded as she moved the tray off the cart, lifted the cushion that was larger than her and heaved it up onto the cart. She pushed the cart next to the table, locked the wheels, and scrambled up. The cart and cushion put her at a proper height at the table.

Introductions were made around the table. The other fox was Stacker’s twin sister, Jezzie. The male pine marten was Grenar, and the female dog was Lorraine.

“You left the lab in a hurry,” Stacker said. “I was concerned.”

“Especially when you and the others heard me cry out as I climbed the nearest tree?”

Stacker bowed his head for a moment. “Well, yes.”

“It was all the bones crunching around me. Instinct cried out, ‘Flee before you get eaten next!’.”

“So, it wasn’t that you were sickened after you ate what you could of our lab specimen?”

Blossome wigwagged her tail left to right and back once. “No.” She drooped her tail. “I actually liked the taste of cooked small rodent. Thank you for suggesting it. But I know I won’t directly kill another anytime soon.” She pointed to the three small sausage slices on her plate. “I’m going to determine if that was a one-off or if I really do like the taste.” She nibbled on one and nodded. “Yes, I think I actually like that.”

“Until you came into the lab this morning, I didn’t know squirrels ate anything other than seeds and nuts,” Jezzie said. “I didn’t know you also ate meat.”

“We don’t normally do so, unless there aren’t a lot of other choices. After all, you need to take a life to have meat.” She poked at the other two sausage slices. “Someone had to kill some small rodents for these to be available in the serving line. I understand they are a nuisance here in the city as Stacker explained to me at the start of the lab. I will eat all I took out of respect of those who lost their lives so I could try it.”

She spent the rest of the meal explaining what life was like for a cousin squirrel. The others knew little of it. She loudly bit open a butternut and nibbled on the nut within and explained how her incisors continuously grew.

“They continuously grow?” Lorraine asked.

Blossom nodded while flicking her tail up and down once. “Just like most other cousin rodents’ teeth. I need to constantly gnaw hard things to ensure they remain the proper length.”

“My father taught me you claim a territory and defend it from all other squirrels,” Grenar said.

“That’s the case in many forests including the one here next to the school. But that’s not the case for my home forest.” She gave a brief history of The Refuge and they were amazed.

The lunch period flew by. They thanked her for educating them on cousin squirrels.