

THIRTY-FIVE

It was only half-handspan/half a klick until sunset based on the clock on Aldin's flatpanel as he and Brave left the hospital. It was snowing steadily.

"We'll need to hurry to get a room for the night."

"A Biggen room?" Brave chittered while raising his newly freed tail into a slightly crooked curl briefly. "No need. Is winter, my Dame, Hope, will make room for us."

"Are you sure?"

Brave pulled his flatpanel off his back, pressed the icon that connected to his mother's flatpanel. It wasn't long before she was on the screen.

"My pup, Brave! Is late, I sleep soon."

"Dame Hope. Elder Voice Friend and I are at Biggen healing place. Look!" He raised his left forelimb up so it would be seen by the camera. And then he wigwagged his tail."

Hope's face lit up. "Is good!"

"Yes, is good. We no have time to return to The Refuge. Dark soon."

"Come. You two nest with us tonight. There are others here. Will be warm."

Aldin leaned in. "Is alright, Elder Hope? I no wish intrude."

"Sire of my pup's future mate is always welcome in Learn Forest."

"Learn Forest?" Brave asked.

"Our forest is near Biggen learning place and Biggens come here to learn about the forest. All who live here speak on this decide to give our forest name."

"Name make sense," Brave replied.

"We will arrive at sunset," Aldin added. "Well, if it no snowing at time sun would set."

Hope shared acorns, hazelnuts, and seeds with her visitors. There were three others in Hope's tree hollow. As she warned it was a little tight, but that was good as more bodies meant more

warmth against the winter cold. The forest's two other Elders Grace and Charity were there. Brave recognized the other, a male, whose territory was adjacent to his.

"Is good to see you live," he greeted Brave. "Unlike Elders, I no choose name yet. Is strange idea to me. It make sense in time of truce."

"I no choose name Brave. Given name by Biggen squirrel, Energy."

"So, I have explained to him," Hope responded gently nuzzling the male.

Brave looked back and forth between them.

Hope flicked her tail up and down once. "Yes, we nest together since harvest time. I might choose him as my new mate."

"If you do, may the two of you have many pups I may call my littermates," Brave responded.

The six soon snuggled down in a jumble in the bottom of the hollow. None of them were chilled through the snowy night.

Schoolmaster Pekan met Blossom at his office door.

"Please come in," he ushered her in. "You have a visitor."

Blossom's eyes lit up as she saw her father. She bounded over and hugged him tightly.

"There's still a few weeks left in the school term, Father. Why are you here?"

"I was passing through and..."

Brave popped up from behind Pekan's desk.

Blossom chattered in excitement as she bounded over to him and hugged him too. She pulled back and looked more closely.

"Your casts are gone. That's wonderful! I can hardly see the bend in your tail." She realized she blurted that in Common and began to repeat it in chitterspeak.

Brave remained quiet as he smiled at her and nodded while flicking his tail up and down once. He pulled his flatpanel off his back and started typing and it spoke for him, surprising her further. "Raoul teaching me hear Biggenspeak and Biggenspeak writing so flatpanel may speak for me. I am happy to see you, Blossom. I know you can no...not stay long. Schoolmaster Pekan and Second Father explain you must study for learning tests. Dr. Roxle speak I must wear this,"

he pointed to the brace with his tail, “brace-cast thing another nine to ten-and-three days. I then all healed!”

She embraced him in another tight hug. “Second Father?” Her tail lifted briefly in a curl behind her.

“Your sire, Elder Voice Friend, insist I call him sire,” he chittered. “Much like my dame insist you do so with her.” He typed some more. “Switch back to Biggenspeak. Good practice. I can no wait.” He drooped his tail. “Not wait for you to come home with Saniel.”

“I can’t wait either, Brave. Thank you for stopping by.” She hugged him a third time and briefly nuzzled his neck. She turned to her father. “Thank you for bringing him by, Father.”

“Do you think he would let me bring him home without stopping by?” Aldin gigglechittered.

Brave’s tail wigwagged in the negative as he shook his head no out of habit after not being able to wigwag his tail for a whole season.