

THIRTY-SIX

The hovercraft quietly settled into the soft snow. Two citizen squirrels and a cousin squirrel stepped out with small backpacks. All three sank a little in the snow. One of the two larger squirrels quietly watched as the hovercraft rose in the air and raced off in the direction they had come from.

“Well, I guess I’m committed to this now,” Moselyn mumbled under her breath.

Saniel nudged her gently. “You were awfully quiet on the trip here, Moselyn. Having second thoughts?”

She drooped her tail. “Some, but I’m here now.”

Blossom grabbed Moselyn’s right forepaw and gently tugged pointing up the nearest tree with her tail. “Come on,” she urged her friend. She turned, leapt at the tree, and started climbing. Moselyn stared up at the huge butternut tree having never seen any tree as large as it before. She glanced at Saniel who nodded in encouragement. She began to climb, though more slowly than Blossom. Saniel held back to keep pace with Moselyn. It didn’t take long to reach the entrance to Saniel’s home.

“Mom! Dad! We’re home!” He called out as he opened the door and let the other two in before him.

Moselyn looked around not knowing what to expect other than they were roughly 13 mits above the snow up in a tree. And it was a huge tree. She again marveled at that, having never seen a tree so large in diameter before. She gasped at the interior inside the entrance. It looked very similar to her own home. She half expected her parents to round the corner when Saniel’s did. She also expected it to look more primitive, like maybe a smaller space with a nest in it like the one Saniel and Butternut had built in her and Butternut’s room at the school.

Introductions were made. Both Jessophat and Carulin hugged her warmly. Carulin then stood back a moment and looked her up and down. “You look different from how you looked in our video call last month.”

“My winter pelt has grown in. It’s greyer than my summer one, Ms. Carulin.”

“Carulin, please. You look just as lovely even with the season color change. After Saniel shows you around and you settle in, would you please help me with dinner?”

“Of course.”

Butternut tilted her head this way and that as she stared at Carulin. Her tail wigwagged slowly.

“You can tell?” Carulin asked.

“It shows just a little,” Butternut replied. “May he or she be healthy.

“More like they,” Carulin replied.

“They?” Saniel asked as he looked at his mother.

She smiled broadly. “After many years of trying, I’m pregnant. You’ll be an older brother come early spring. Dr. Neroff says its twins.”

Saniel hugged his mother tightly. “I’m so happy for you and Dad!”

She scuffed a foot paw. “We tried to time it this way on purpose so that if it worked as it did...”

“So, they would be born at about the same time as this coming season’s smart squirrel pups, right?” Saniel finished.

“Yes.”

“Congratulations,” Butternut said. She turned to Saniel and hugged him briefly. “I’ll catch up in a little bit, Saniel. I’m going to check in with my parents.” She turned to Moselyn. “It’ll be alright, you’ll see.” She darted out.

Saniel showed her around the living spaces within the tree.

“Where does that lead?” She asked, pointing to a door in one corner.

“Down to a few levels of storage in the tree and then down on the ground floor we have a guest room with another bathroom. It’s way down there because not all our visitors have claws and can climb vertically like we can. We have a rope ladder we can extend all the way down to help those who need the assistance.”

She nodded as Saniel led her to the bedrooms and indicated which room was his. She noted he had both a nest and a hammock.

“I haven’t used the hammock-bed in a few years. I have held onto it just in case.”

“Where am I staying?” She asked.

Saniel was surprised by the question. “Well, with Butternut, Brave, and me, of course. I’m sure we’ll split time between here and her parents’ nest tree.”

She nuzzled him. “I was hoping to just be with you.”

“We’re off-grid here, Moselyn. We’re too far from the nearest village, Snow Valley. We have solar with battery back-up. You’ll appreciate the extra bodies for warmth at night and during storms. We don’t have unlimited power here.”

Her eyes went wide. “You don’t have heat?”

“Only what is exhausted by the refrigerator or produced while cooking. This tree keeps above freezing, but during some of the storms, you can see your breath in here. Before we and the local smart squirrels joined up to create The Refuge, there were a few winters where we had to sleep down in the guest room.”

“But heat rises,” she replied.

Saniel nodded. “Yes. However, snow is an excellent insulator. Right now, the bottom of this tree is already under two mits of snow. You get three or four people down there sharing body heat and you won’t notice there is no electric heat.”

“Wait. So, you have slept with your folks in the winter?”

“Up until last winter, yes. Last winter we shared space here with the two dozen or so surviving smart squirrels. I spent nights with my folks and nights snuggled among the smart squirrels. There were nights where we all slept in one fluffy mass in one of the storage rooms that had been given to them.” He walked over to a small bureau and opened a drawer. “We have extra blankets if you prefer, but trust me, snuggling down with a few others works so much better than just a blanket or two. Look how well you’ve slept since you allowed me to join you and Butternut in your room at school.”

Moselyn nodded. “Yes, I guess I have a lot to learn here.”

“Well, you will receive school credit for it,” Saniel agreed. “You can leave your backpack in here with mine for now as I don’t know which tree we’re sleeping in tonight.”