

## THIRTY-SEVEN

Moselyn and Saniel joined his mother in the small kitchen.

“Saniel, you may help with dishes after the meal. Please go peak in on your smart squirrel friends.”

Saniel nodded understanding his mother wanted alone time with Moselyn.

After he left, Carulin turned to Moselyn. “How much do you know about helping in the kitchen?”

Moselyn pulled a chef’s knife out of the block it was stored in. She inspected the edge, nodded. She pulled a cutting board from those leaning in a rack. She set it on the counter and started dicing an onion. She went slowly at first and soon picked up speed.

“This is the first time I’ve attempted this with grown-out claws. Carulin.”

Carulin relaxed. “Good, I was worried you need to learn some kitchen skills.” She handed the younger squirrel more vegetables to dice-up. “And I bet you’re having second thoughts coming here.”

Moselyn nearly nicked a finger with her knife as she physically tensed up. She paused and gave Carulin her full attention. The older squirrel drooped her tail.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t distract you when you’re handling a sharp object.”

“Yes, I’ve had second thoughts.”

“So didn’t I back then. Extra school credit is just an excuse to allow you to be here.” She left ‘with Saniel’ unspoken. “Remember that. Spending the Solstice break here helps you to better understand yourself and possibly what you really want. However, if you find it’s too much for you, there’s nothing stopping you from deciding to go home. It won’t affect your grades per my conversation with your schoolmaster.”

“They won’t let me come home...”

“Unless you trim your claws and stop acting like a cousin squirrel,” she finished for her. “I’m well aware as we discussed through video call several weeks ago, Moselyn. I just want you to know I won’t judge you if you find this isn’t the life you wish to pursue. If you find you need to talk, I’m here. I think you’ll find any adult here will listen to you. Same with the smart squirrels, both the youth and adults.”

Tears suddenly came unbidden to Moselyn’s eyes. She set the knife down, buried her muzzle in her forepaws, and started to bawl. Carulin scooped her up in a hug and let the young adult cry

into her shoulder. Carulin slowly rocked her back and forth gently stroking her back with her left forepaw.

“Shh...there, there. Let it out,” Carulin spoke quietly. “I know what you’re going through, Moselyn. I’ve been there myself. Cry as long as you need.”