

FORTY

The Solstice celebration at The Refuge was similar to what Moselyn was used to back home. The smart squirrels as the cousin squirrels called themselves had adopted some of the customs she knew including the exchange of small gifts. Brave had gifted her, Saniel, and Blossom some candied nuts. After some questioning prodding, he admitted Aldin had gotten them for him to give out. Saniel was a little subdued as his paternal grandmother couldn't visit that year for some reason. She did send him and Blossom red scarfs she had knitted. The ends had the same material as the back of a flatpanel, so they would stick to their fur and not get under paw while climbing. They wore them, posing for a picture with Aldin who sported the one he had been given the previous year.

One thing was different at this event. Elder Tassel had called all together. Moselyn had no idea how many squirrels there were at The Refuge prior to the gathering as she stared about all the branches filled with squirrels. There must have been over a hundred cousin squirrels present, along with Saniel's family and Raoul.

Tassel pulled her flatpanel off her back and typed as she looked at Moselyn. "Moselyn, you will need to turn on the translator program. Not all present understand Biggenspeak. All but you understand chitterspeak." She drooped her tail. "I do not mean to single you out but will be easier for me to use only chitterspeak."

Moselyn bowed to Tassel in thanks for the warning. She turned on the program on her flatpanel and lowered the volume so it wouldn't drown-out Tassel.

Tassel tucked her flatpanel back on her back and turned to the others. She bowed to them. "Thank you for gathering. This time last winter there were just over two tens of us still alive here. We very scared. Risk accepting help of Biggen Kind and family. And it was no like what our dames, their dames, and dames before them warn. We trusted Kind, but no become pups forever. He, Sunshine, and Energy very generous with food. No one starve through winter as they promised. We chose a new branch to follow choosing year-round truce and to form a colony like Friend's old home forest where all territory is shared and all help all. We turned two tragedies, the owl attacks and the terrible Biggen-set fire, into success! We have added to our numbers from afar, both smart squirrel and Biggens," she nodded towards Raoul and Moselyn. "Many smart squirrels have learned Elder things so we better prepared should tragedy strike again. Others chose learn Biggen things thanks to help of Butternut and Biggen Mentor." She paused a moment. "Mentor is home visiting family and will return soon. What I try get at is, look around. We have no only survived, we have thrived! This is why I suggest we adopt Biggen celebration of shortest day of year as our own. One to give thanks for the past year and to look forward to the year to come!"

All gathered let out a huge round of cheering in agreement. As it died down, Tassel concluded. "Go forth, spend time with your loved ones. Give thanks to the Creator and to each other. I can no wait to see how much more we thrive this coming year."

Moselyn spent a good portion of the rest of the morning taking more notes for her report, partially because she didn't want to forget what she had witnessed, but also because she was feeling homesick. She had never missed a Solstice holiday with her parents prior to this. She sighchittered and paused a moment, realizing what she had just done. She always simply sighed without a chitter added to it in the past. She had surprised herself at doing it.

Carulin walked into the room and witnessed her sighchitter and reaction to having done so. "Letting your inner cousin out a little more, I see," she stated.

Moselyn drooped her tail, which she also didn't do much before as she nodded. "I've only been here a week, but it's getting easier to do as I see everyone else here do it."

"Do you want to talk about why you just sighed?"

Moselyn looked down. "I miss my parents. I've never spent Solstice away from them."

Carulin nodded. "I understand. It can be hard. And as you know, they don't know exactly where you are so that they don't come pester you about 'acting like a cousin'. And you can't call them directly as Schoolmaster Pekan put a block on your flatpanel as part of the assignment for exploring smart squirrel life. They can relay a message to you through Schoolmaster Pekan. You could do the same if you wish. Send them a simple holiday greeting and let them know how you're doing. Obviously, I don't know how they'll react or if they'll reply."

Moselyn quickly hugged Carulin. "Thank you! I'll record a message and send it to Schoolmaster Pekan."

"If you want privacy for that, there is an empty storage room two stories below us you could use."

Moselyn hugged her a second time, tucked her flatpanel on her hip and made her way to the door the led down. She hadn't previously opened it and looked within the entire time she'd been there. She hesitated a moment when she saw it was a near vertical shaft. She got down on all four paws and proceeded down the shaft headfirst. She arrived at the landing for the second level and stood up. Again, she was in awe of what she had just done without needing to think about it too much. She looked back up the semi-dark shaft to the doorway a good five or six mits above her. She turned back to the doorway at the edge of the landing and couldn't make out the text in the dim light that made its way down the shaft. She pulled her flatpanel off her hip and awakened the screen. It gave off just enough light to see the sign reading, Storage Room. She smiled in amusement that the door had a sign.

Moselyn twisted the door handle and entered the dark space within. She felt along the wall next to the door and found a slide-switch. She slowly slid it up and overhead lights came on. The

higher she slid the switch, the brighter the lighting became. She blinked a few times waiting for her eyes to adjust and looked around. One wall contained countless empty storage sacks folded and stacked neatly. She spied several old nests. This must have been where this forest's survivors had spent their previous winter, she thought to herself.

Of course, now she had to think of what she was going to say to her folks. After some thought, it occurred to her that this space wouldn't do. She left the room, killing the lights, shutting the door behind her and quickly climbed back up to the living level, closing the main floor door behind her.

"That was quick," Carulin stated.

"I don't think that space will do. I'll be back soon." Moselyn darted outside and climbed further up the tree. She perched herself on a branch against the trunk, both feet firmly clutching the branch and one hand clutching the bark of the trunk. She thought about that some more and decided to climb up just a bit more, turn around and grip the trunk with her feet and one hand. She was just above that branch for safety. With her free hand, she held her flatpanel out and pointed the camera at herself.

"Hi, Mom and Dad! I'm having a good time on this school assignment deep in a forest with huge butternut trees." She slowly panned the flatpanel one way and the other, including pointing it downward showing she was at least 20 mits above the ground. She then pointed the camera back at her again. "I hope you're having a wonderful Winter Solstice. I love and miss you both!" She ended the message and sent it off to Schoolmaster Pekan to relay.