

FORTY-ONE

The four of them had gathered at Blossom's family tree the morning after the Solstice. It was a bright sunny day, nearly blindingly so as it reflected off the snow below. Blossom seemed a little on edge. Brave tried to comfort her. She perked up a bit and smiled at him.

"Brave," she chittered. "I need alone time with Energy. Would you do something with Moss for three to four claws of time?"

Brave looked at her with his head tilted slightly sideways one way and then the other before flicking his tail up and down once.

She turned to Moselyn and switched to Common. "I need to discuss something in private with Saniel. I've asked Brave to keep you company."

Moselyn raised an eyebrow. "Alright." She turned to Brave. "What should we do?"

Brave pulled out his flatpanel and typed. "We could work on your chitterspeak," he drooped his tail. "But that would be a waste of a sunny day. So, instead, let's practice your jumps. Tag!" He tucked his panel on his back, turned, lightly bapped his tail against her nose and took off.

"Really?" She quipped but gave chase.

Blossom watched them briefly as they quickly ran off through the branches, Moselyn hesitating at each gap before successfully making the jump. "I hope he warns her that she must be careful in how she leads the chase should she catch him."

"It's not that time of winter yet, and as he's an adult, I trust Brave would know better." Saniel responded. "So, what do you need to talk to me alone about, Blossom?"

Blossom drooped her tail. "I'm going to ask Brave to pledge himself to me provided my parents approve as this is only my first winter." She reached for his hands with her forepaws and squeezed them gently. "As I chose you first as a potential mate, I want your permission too."

"Why would you need my permission?" Saniel asked. "Didn't I already agree we would bring in a smart squirrel when the time was right? And I haven't tried to chase off Brave, have I?"

"The tone of your voice betrays you."

Saniel drooped his tail. "Do you really want me to speak what I'm thinking?"

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once.

Saniel sighchittered. “You’re in a hurry. You’ve always been in a hurry. You chose me as a potential mate weeks before others born last year looked for potential mates. You did whatever it took to get into Senior School a semester early. When your father tested you among other ‘Biggens’, you tapped down the fear quicker than even your mother. Smart squirrels are encouraged to wait until their second winter to mate. They may do so as soon as their second spring. Do you know why you must wait until those older than you have litters?” He paused a moment, but not long enough for her to answer. “It’s so your body can finish growing. It’s so you can watch and learn first paw how the process of leading your mate on a chase and the resulting coupling works. And to observe the whole pregnancy process, birth, and the beginning stages of raising the pups. That’s why. And I’m sure you’ve heard all this before from your parents.”

Saniel threw his hands into the air and paced around on the branch as his tail whipped about a bit. “I’m worried about you, Blossom. As I said before, you’re in such a hurry to grow-up. Slow down a little and enjoy this time while you have it. You don’t get long compared to us ‘Biggens’ and that’s unfair. Now you’re looking to pledge yourself to Brave a full season before the earliest you can raise a family, provided he agrees to couple with you so soon.” He paused again very briefly. “You need to slow down a little, Blossom. I fear you’re going to burn yourself out long before you can raise a family or attend medical school.” He stopped his pacing and faced her. “I care for you, Blossom. I want what’s best for you. Even if I’m reduced from potential mate to just friend.”

Blossom bounded over to Saniel and embraced him. She flicked her tail up and down once. “Yes, maybe I seem to be in a hurry. I feel this urgency in the back of my mind that I need to move along quickly. I don’t know why. I just feel I need to.” She pulled back from the embrace. “Per the Elder lessons I attended, in many forests, Brave and I would already be mates after I saved his life. Technically, that would make you a mate brother to him as you helped save him. I just want to make it official, even if we have to wait until next winter to raise a family. And I still want to spend the rest of my life with you too, Saniel. I promise you this. When the time comes, Brave won’t be the only male chasing me, unless my other potential mate decides to choose to only couple with his other potential mate.”