

Winter Nest

Mina had never been in this part of the forest before so she moved cautiously, keeping her ears pricked for any sign of danger and, wherever possible, staying within the undergrowth. The young rat was quite good at staying out of sight but, in this case, she was not good enough. Despite all the care she was taking, she had yet to notice that someone was already watching her.

High above the rat, Lyse swung round to hang from the underside of a branch. “Hi there.” She called out, keeping her grip on the tree with her hind paws in order to free her front ones for a friendly wave. “Are you lost?”

Mina went rigid with fright then realized that the speaker was only a squirrel dangling from the branches above her and relaxed a little. “No. Well, not really. I’m looking for somewhere to stay.”

Lyse dropped down, using the web of branches to slow herself so that she landed quite gracefully in front of the rat. “Well perhaps I can help? I know this area quite well. I’m sure I can find a place for you.”

“Well it’s not just me.” Mina admitted, “I used to belong to a whole colony on the other side of the river, but ... well ...” for a moment tears started to appear in her eyes but she blinked them away and forced herself to continue. “A weasel found our nest site. There’s only twelve of us left now, and ... and we need to find a new place before winter so we all split up to search.” she managed, barely succeeding in her effort to keep the emotions out of her voice.

Lyse put a comforting arm round Mina’s shoulder, “I ... I’m so sorry. I wouldn’t have asked if I’d known it was such a painful topic but please ... you don’t have to hold back the tears for my sake.”

“I ... it’s not that ...” Again she had to fight down the emotions before she could continue. “The rest of my nest are relying on me. I need to find somewhere for us to stay. After that I’ll be able to think about what happened and properly cry over it. Now’s ... just not a good time.”

Lyse nodded gently. “For what it’s worth I really can help find somewhere for you to stay. The fact that it needs to be big enough for twelve of you limits our options a little, but I think I know a place.”

Mina wiped her eyes with one arm, “Really?” The last few days had been pretty much devoid of good news. “We didn’t exactly manage to salvage much stuff from our old nest, so I can’t offer much in exchange ...” she began.

“I’m not going to charge you for showing you a possible nest site.” Lyse assured. “If I did need an incentive then consider this; You guys are probably going to move in around here whether I help you or

not. If I'm going to have new neighbors, I'd rather start things between us well than not. Besides it will only take a few minutes." Taking Mina by the paw she lead her onward.

It didn't take long for the pair to arrive at the foot of a giant oak tree and during that time they exchanged names and a little about themselves. "Here we are." Lyse announced, ducking beneath two gnarled roots and pointing out the narrow tunnel hidden between them.

Mina had to admit that it looked pretty good. Of all the possible sites she had seen so far most had been too exposed or too obvious to be safe from predators but, if Lyse had not pointed it out, Mina knew she would have walked right past this one. After glancing at the squirrel for permission, she squeezed into the tunnel and crawled a short distance until it widened into the main chamber.

The room was dark and smelled like it had been abandoned for some time. Towards the back were several more tunnels, presumably leading to the other parts of the nest. She was just about to check those out when the little light that came from the entrance was abruptly cut off. She turned to see Lyse squeezing through after her. "So, do you think this would do for you and your friends?" the squirrel asked.

"It looks perfect." Mina ran one paw over the dry earth wall. The tree above them provided shelter from the rain as well as sucking up excess moisture from the soil, keeping everything in here cozy and dry. "Too perfect. This place was definitely built as a rats' nest. Why isn't there anyone here?"

Lyse shrugged. "It's been deserted since before I moved into this tree but I do know that there used to be more owls in this area. Don't worry," she added hastily, noticing Mina's alarmed expression. "There are far fewer now. I wouldn't be living here otherwise."

Mina thought about this for a moment. "This is your tree then? You really don't mind if me and my colony make our nest here?"

Lyse shrugged. "I live up in the branches. I doubt having you around will bother me much and having some company would be nice, especially during winter."

Mina didn't know what to say to that. She was already grateful to the squirrel for showing her this spot but after finding out that Lyse was also letting them share her home the only response she could think of was to throw her arms around the larger rodent in a hug. "Thank you." She mumbled through a face full of squirrel fur. "Thank you so much. You've saved my nest. We had nowhere to go and now you're giving us all this? I promise we'll find some way to repay you." Since finding her old nest destroyed, Mina had been constantly struggling not to cry but now she couldn't help letting a few happy tears run down her cheeks.

Lyse stiffened a little and tried to pry herself away from the rat's clutches. "You're welcome?" she replied awkwardly. "But please let go. You're making my fur soggy."

"Sorry." Mina stepped back drying her eyes on the back of her arm. "But we've all been searching for the last few days and this is by far the best we have found. I thought we were just going to have to keep looking until predators picked us off one by one but now we can rebuild our nest. I ... I can't tell you how much this has saved us. When the others ..." she suddenly hesitated. "Oh! I have to go tell them about this. Please, I don't mean to be rude, but would it be okay if I went now? I need to get back to our meeting point before nightfall."

Lyse assured the grateful rat that she didn't mind at all and watched her scurry off back out the entrance, only to return a few moments later to repeat her apologies for leaving so abruptly. After reassuring the rodent that she really didn't mind and watching her leave a second time, Lyse crawled out of the tunnel and climbed the oak to what she considered a far more comfortable height. Settling down in the crook of two branches, she looked out over the surrounding woodland.

By now the sun was starting to set. Lyse watched from her vantage point, mulling over the events of the last half an hour thoughtfully. There were certainly advantages to having a colony of rats move in but she couldn't deny that the change made her a little nervous. Still, she had already offered them the site. It was too late to change her mind so there wasn't much point in worrying about her impulsive decision. Before the sun had completely disappeared she climbed halfway down to her drey and curled up among the twigs and moss.

"Lyse!" a voice calling her name interrupted the squirrel in the middle of a pleasant dream. Blinking sleepily she glanced around before crawling out of her nest. It was still a long time til dawn and the cloudy sky meant there wasn't even much moonlight to work by. Still, Lyse knew the shape of her tree well enough that the lack of light was little hindrance and she soon came to one of the lower branches.

"Lyse!" the voice called again and this time the squirrel could just make out Mina's dim outline some way below her.

"What?" she demanded, very unhappy to have been woken like this.

Mina's vision was far better adapted to the low light. "I've brought my colony." She turned to wave at the surrounding group, unaware that the squirrel could not see any of them.

"And you just had to wake me up in the middle of the night to tell me that?" Lyse demanded.

"I ... oh! I'm really sorry. I had no idea you were asleep. I just thought it would be a good idea to let you know before we all moved in. Your offer is still open, right?" A touch of desperation was clearly audible in her question.

“Yeah. Sure.” Lyse clambered down the last few feet of the trunk to get a better look at the new arrivals. “It was partly my fault anyway. I should have realized that we would prefer different sleep schedules. Anyway, I guess you probably all want to see your new home. You don’t have to get my permission to go in. It’s yours now so do as you please.” She gestured toward the entrance and Mina then the rest of the rats eagerly filed in. Standing beside the opening she could hear muffled exclamations from inside as they explored.

She was just about to head back up into the branches when Mina poked her head out from the hole. “Hey. You coming in?”

“I don’t think so.” Lyse yawned. “Your colony probably wants some time to adjust and I could do with a little more sleep.”

“Actually, could I talk to you for a minute? Sorry, I don’t mean to keep you up any longer but ...” She climbed fully out of the hole then sat beside it looking worried.

“Sure. I’m awake now anyway. What’s bothering you?” Lyse joined her and put one arm round the rat’s back.

“It ... it’s just ... I don’t really know what I’m doing.” Mina suddenly admitted. “All the people who used to be in charge back home are currently lining the belly of that wretched stoat. I wasn’t important or supposed to be in charge or anything. I just kind of ended up giving instructions to the other survivors afterwards. Everyone was panicking and needed someone to keep them together, at least until we had somewhere else to go. But as I was the one to find this place that’s only cemented my position as the leader. I don’t know what to do. I’m terrified of getting something wrong and you’re the only person I know who I can even admit this to.”

“Shh. It’s okay. You seem to be doing a fine job so far. I don’t know much about your group but they clearly trust you. The fact that you’re scared of making mistakes is a good thing. It will help you notice any dangers your colony might face. Just keep going and don’t worry so much.” She gently rubbed one paw in slow circles over the rat’s back, feeling Mina start to relax and lean into her. “Feel better?”

“A bit.” Mina rested her head against the squirrel’s shoulder. “Thank you for doing all this for us. I do worry that most of what I’ve achieved is your doing though. I don’t really think I’ve earned the position I’m in. If anything it should be yours.”

“Don’t be silly. You kept your group safe during while searching. You might not have found the nest site on your own but you found and trusted me. Just because you didn’t do everything yourself, doesn’t mean you don’t deserve the credit for where you’ve lead them. There’s always going to be some luck involved in life, you shouldn’t blame yourself for the bad things and dismiss the good bits as chance.”

“Thank you. Although, there is one last thing bothering me. When a colony moves into a new nest, we usually have a big celebration. But, given the circumstances of how we left our old nest, I don’t think that’s really appropriate. Plus we don’t have any supply reserves so it wouldn’t be much of a party anyway. On the other hand, I don’t really want to start my stint in charge by going against tradition and saying we can’t celebrate and, after the last few day, I think the everyone could use an excuse to relax a little.”

“Sorry. That’s not something I can really help with.” Lyse replied, “Squirrels are more solitary than you guys. I don’t know much about leading people. You’ll have to figure that out for yourself. Still, you seem to be more capable that you give yourself credit for. I suspect you’ll figure things out.”

“Yeah, but ...”

“Hey Mina!” Both of them jumped slightly as one of Mina’s colony stuck his head out the hole. “Have you seen how deep the tunnels go? We could fit twice the number we had in our old nest in here and still have room.” He paused, realizing that he had interrupted something.

Mina glared at him. “Go back inside Tal, I’ll come and look in a moment.” Tal quickly vanished back inside and Mina stood up. “Sorry about that Lyse, but I should probably go supervise before things start getting out of hand. Thanks for listening to me ramble and for the reassurances.”

“Any time.” The squirrel replied, then yawned. “Although, if possible, I’d prefer a time when the sun is up.” Mina apologized again for waking her which only made Lyse laugh before climbing back up to her drey. By now the sky was getting lighter and she wanted to get a little more sleep while she still could.

For the next few days Mina barely saw Lyse. The squirrel had dropped in shortly before midday to tell her that she would be away for a few days foraging. Mina hoped that this wasn’t just an excuse to get away from her colony for a while. She had tried to keep everyone quiet, but it was impossible. The was too much to do and everyone was constantly busy, herself in particular.

She had foraging parties of her own to organize as well as sending scouts to get a better feel for the area and keep an eye out for any potential dangers. The nest site itself needed a lot of work as well. There were places where the tunnels were on the brink of collapse and needed shoring up. There were areas where the tree roots had broken through and needed cutting back. There was the leftover possessions from the previous occupant to be sorted. Worse of all, everyone kept coming to her whenever anything went wrong or something needed to be decided.

Three days after moving in, Mina was pacing round the base of her tree. It had rained the day before and she wanted to be certain that none of the foraging parties could have left any paw marks in the

softened mud that might reveal their presence to a passing carnivore. Having checked thoroughly, she was just about to go back inside when a voice called out to her. Glancing up she saw Lyse sitting on a low branch. “Hey there. Got time to come and join me?”

Mina nodded, walked to the base of the tree and, digging her claws deep into the bark, started to climb. She couldn’t begin to match the effortless grace with which Lyse moved through the branches, lacking both the squirrel’s specializations and the experience, but she was still a capable enough climber if a little slow.

“ ’bout time.” Lyse teased when she finally reached her branch.

“Hey! You should try crawling through a few of our tunnels some day. We’ll see who’s slower then.” Mina shot back crawling out along the branch to sit beside her. She was a little hesitant at first. To the squirrel this was clearly pretty low down, but Mina had never been entirely comfortable with heights and was just realizing how much she would have preferred to have this conversation on the ground.

“You don’t have to look so worried.” Lyse told her, “You’re not going to fall.”

“Yeah, I’d feel a little better on the ground though.” Mina protested.

“Don’t worry, it’s safe.” The squirrel made a show of stretching and leaning backwards, allowing her self to tip too far in the process and falling back off the branch.

Mina jumped and tried to catch her, only to realize that the squirrel still had her knees wrapped round the branch, allowing the rest of her body to swing below. “See, even if you did slip there’s plenty of time to catch something.”

Mina was less than reassured. “Sorry, could you not do that?” she asked, “It’s making me a little uncomfortable.”

“Eh, hang out with me long enough and I’ll get you comfortable even in the highest branches.” With effortless grace Lyse unhooked her legs, flipped herself over in midair, then caught the branch and pulled herself back into a sitting position. “So, how’s the colony going?” she asked.

“Busy. People keep asking me this or insisting that I settle disputes, but our food stores are growing and we should be able to make it through the winter alright. How was your foraging trip?”

As soon as Mina had said it she realized that it was the wrong thing to ask. Lyse was not the first squirrel she had met and, from experience, she knew that the fastest way to offend one was to express any interest about their hidden food reserves. Most rats didn’t really care who knew about their food supplies as it was kept in the nest and would be well defended. But squirrels relied almost entirely on

secrecy to keep their stores safe and, as a consequence, were generally extremely suspicious of any questions even remotely related to their caches and outright hostile to anyone who might be a threat.

Lyse, however, merely shrugged. "It went okay. Can we talk about something else?" she responded neutrally.

"Of course." Eager to make up for her blunder, Mina plunged into a description of the past few days, telling her friend all that they had achieved since moving in.

After a few minutes listening to the in depth description of the colony's functions, Lyse laughed. "See. I told you you'd be good at this leader thing. Actually, that reminds me, did you make up your mind on that new nest party thing yet?"

"Oh, yeah. At least, I think so. It didn't seem right to have a party so soon after losing so many, so the first thing we are having is a funeral. It's going to take place the day after tomorrow and should be a chance for everyone to say goodbye to those who didn't make it this far. We are still going to have a moving in celebration though, but not until a few days after the funeral. That way we'll have more time to get some supplies for it and will get to celebrate a new start without the past still hanging over us. Oh, and you're invited to both if you want."

For a moment Lyse seemed completely caught off guard. "Really? Isn't this something that would be better celebrated between your own colony, without intruders getting in the way?"

Mina shook her head. "I'm pretty sure that intruders who saved my entire colony from being wiped out are welcome at any of our events." she insisted.

Lyse thought for a moment. "I won't come to the funeral. I never knew any of the people you're saying goodbye to and I think that is something best kept to yourselves. But, if you're really sure you don't mind, I might drop in on your party."

"Of course. After everything you've done for us, you'd be more than welcome." She had been going to say more but was interrupted by someone calling her name. Glancing down the pair saw one of Mina's colony poking his head out the hole entrance.

"Mina? Hey Mina!" he called.

"Urg. I'd better go find out what's gone wrong this time." she announced getting up, but Lyse caught her arm.

"Is it likely to be very important or something that couldn't be fixed later?" she pressed. Mina shook her head, if anything serious had gone wrong she was sure Namar would be shouting a lot louder.

“Then just sit with me and watch for a bit.” Lyse insisted. “I’d like that and you look like you could use a break.”

Sitting back down, Mina watched as Namar came out the hole and walked once round the tree calling her name and looking confused. He knew she wasn’t in the nest and could smell that she wasn’t far but couldn’t see her.

From their lofty vantage point Lyse and Mina shared a mischievous laugh as Namar completed his second circuit round the base of the tree, then went back inside still calling her and looking more confused by the minute.

“Nobody ever thinks to look up.” Lyse giggled, “Remember that if you ever feel like taking a break from all your responsibilities.”

Mina laughed as well. “Thanks Lyse. I needed that, but now I’d better go find out what’s wrong.” feeling much more cheerful she clambered back down and went to sneak up on poor Namar.

It was another week before Mina saw her squirrel friend again. All she knew was that Lyse had left a message with one of the others telling her that she would be away foraging for a few days and would hopefully be back before the party. Once again she was too busy to worry much about Lyse spending so long away from the nest, there was a seemingly never ending list of things to organize and see to.

She worked hard to ensure the funeral went as smoothly as she could manage in the limited time she had allowed herself to prepare. Afterwards the whole colony sat down in the largest of the nest’s chambers and talked about those they had left behind, what they had been like, what they would have done if they’d been here, how things were different now. And after that, Mina had taken a rare break from the pressure of being leader, climbed high enough into the oak tree that she was sure no one could see or hear her, and finally allowed herself to cry for all the people she missed and wished she could see again.

The next day she engrossed herself with arranging the party. They still did not have much to spare but she was determined to make the event as good as she could possibly get it. Driving everyone to gather as many supplies as they could in the little remaining time and helping those who were not on foraging duty to get the nest interior ready. Waking up on the evening of the event she stepped out from the nest to watch the sun set, convinced that she had done everything in her power to get this right.

“Hey. I haven’t missed it have I?” came a voice from above.

Mina spun round and looked up. “Lyse! I was worried you weren’t going to make it.”

“Yeah, sorry. That last trip took a little longer than I expected.” The squirrel clambered down to meet her. “Still I figured with you guys being nocturnal it probably wouldn’t start until late evening anyway.”

“We’re just about to begin. Come on.” Mina took Lyse by the paw and lead her into the nest. Inside the rest of the colony were slowly waking up. Food that had been prepared that morning was brought out. One of the colony, Fiss, had spent the last few days claiming every berry the foragers brought back and had managed to ferment the resulting juice into a sweet and alcoholic drink. It wasn’t very strong and there was only enough for about half a cup each but to Mina it was a strong reminder of home.

She introduced Lyse to the colony, one by one, feeling embarrassed that they had been there a week already yet most hadn’t even spoken to the squirrel yet. Although, given how often the squirrel was away, that wasn’t entirely her fault. A few festive games had been set up and people were finally having fun. A small part of her couldn’t help but feel disappointed when she compared her first party to the ones they had had back home but, while the event was undeniably smaller, it felt like a return to normality after so many days of turmoil and uncertainty. The new nest was finally starting to feel like home.

It was only then that Mina noticed the pile of acorns stacked up on one of the tables and her stomach sank. She had specifically ordered that none of the foraging parties were to take the acorns. She knew how much most squirrels relied on acorns to get through the winter. Oak trees were highly prized territory and Lyse must have had to fight very hard to claim this one as her own. The last thing Mina wanted was for their host to think that they were stealing her food after she had made them so welcome.

First Mina tactfully directed Lyse back towards the other end of the chamber and left her talking to Fiss, then stormed off to find out who had ignored her and brought the acorns in. The first person she spoke to was Tal. He’d been in charge of setting the tables, so he was most likely to know which of the foragers had returned with the acorns. As it happened her search ended there as well. Seeing how angry she was about this, Tal quickly confessed that, despite not being part of any of the foraging parties, he’d been the one to fetch the acorns. They had just been lying on the grass, within a few feet of their hole.

With difficulty Mina managed to push her anger back down, reminding herself that she had only told those in the foraging parties not to touch the acorns and that it wasn’t fair to yell at Tal for breaking rules she hadn’t told him about, regardless of how embarrassing a position it put her in.

By this point Tal was looking very miserable. He had thought that he was helping and knew he was in trouble for bringing in the acorns but couldn’t fathom why. Mina did her best to explain why she hadn’t wanted anyone to bring in the acorns and then, when that only made him look more sorry for himself,

had to reassure him that it was in no way his fault, it was entirely hers for not telling everyone and that she would sort this out quickly.

Unfortunately, she could only think of two ways to resolve the problem. She could try to sneak the acorns back out without Lyse noticing, but Fiss and the squirrel were standing near to the hole exit so she doubted she could get them out without being noticed. Besides, it would be dishonest to try to cover up the mistake at this point and, after all her kindness, Mina was not going to lie to her friend.

The other, harder option was to admit the mistake, give the acorns back and apologize. With a reluctant sigh, Mina picked up the platter of acorns and returned to where the squirrel was still chatting to Fiss. “Um, Lyse? I’m really sorry about this.” she offered the plate to her. “I did tell most people they weren’t supposed to take your acorns but apparently not everyone. I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

The squirrel stared at her in confusion, then looked at the acorns and wrinkled her nose a little. “Um, you don’t need to do that.” she replied after a moment. “I don’t really like acorns much. If you want them then help yourself.”

Now it was Mina’s turn to stare. She’d seen squirrels at each other’s throats over the bitter tasting nuts. “But ... don’t you need them for the winter?” she protested, “I thought you squirrels buried hundreds of them so you could dig them up later.”

“Most squirrels do.” Lyse admitted, “But then, most squirrel’s I’ve met haven’t struck me as all that clever. If you know what you are doing you can find plenty to eat all year round. I’ll admit I sometimes bury a few acorns when they first start falling, just in case I have a really bad winter, but I’ve already taken care of that so you guys are welcome to take any you find.”

“I ...” That seemed too generous to be true. “Lyse, I really appreciate how much you’ve already done for us, but you don’t need to give us your food as well. I know how tough winter can be and I’ve always had my whole colony to help me get through it. You can’t really be planning to get through the winter without any food stores at all?” She tried again to offer the platter of nuts to her guest but Lyse pushed it back.

“I can and I am. Like I said, I already have a few acorns stashed in case things go badly, but it will have to be a really poor year before I find myself having to dip into those reserves. Honestly Mina, you don’t need to worry about me. Look out for your own colony. I’ve been managing on my own for a long time now and don’t need anyone to look after me.” She gave the acorns another push, this time a little too forcefully and scattered most of the plate to the floor. Glancing round she noticed that their conversation had been overheard and several of the rats were now staring in her direction. Blushing, she backed towards the exit. “Thanks for inviting me Mina, but I think I’ll be going now. I really am serious about you keeping the acorns though. I’d rather have you and your colony well fed and thriving

than a few dry nuts any day.” she assured her, then turned and crawled back out the hole, leaving Mina to pick up the scattered nuts and several others staring in confusion.

Mina was tempted to run after her, but decided to give her some time to calm down first. Putting the acorns to one side she stepped onto one of the tables. “Everyone?” The room went silent. A few were wondering if this had something to do with the argument they had just overheard, but most just turned to listen. “I just wanted to say, we have our colony back. Not everyone that we would like is here, I know, and we have far less than we used to, but what we do have is what we gathered in just a few short days. Next year we will have more. I know the work has been hard these last few days and will likely continue to be that way throughout the winter. But when spring comes things will get easier, I promise. We will be able to build up a proper supply of grain. We’ll have the time to do things properly, instead of constant patch jobs. Most importantly we’ll have the time to relax a little. I’m sorry we don’t have much of that now but, at least for today, everyone can enjoy themselves.” She stepped down to an embarrassingly loud chorus of cheers.

Having provided enough of a distraction that everyone seemed to have forgotten about the squirrel storming off Mina slipped away, out the nest and climbed up to sit on one of the oak’s lower branches. “Lyse? I’m really sorry about that. Could we talk?” A moment later there was a rustling from the leaves above her and Lyse dropped down onto her branch.

“Sorry I left like that.” The squirrel began. “I’m just not used to having some many people around. Like I said, squirrels are solitary creatures.”

“Mhh. But rats aren’t.” Mina noted, “We generally rely on each other for help and protection. It doesn’t carry much shame to need something from others and we all try to look out for each other as best we can. I still struggle to believe you can get through the winter as easily as you say you can and I really want to help you, particularly after everything you have done for me. Still, I can’t make you accept my help and I’ll do my best to believe you if you still say that you’ll be fine. Just promise me, if you do find yourself in trouble you’ll come to us? We’ve already gathered a lot of the food we need for this winter, particularly now that I know we can take your acorns. If you do find yourself going hungry you should come to us, alright?”

Lyse stared out into the distance, watching the last few patches of color in the sky fade behind the treeline. The air was already getting cooler. “Okay.” she decided at last “I promise.” that said she turned and climbed higher towards her drey while Mina headed back down to the continuing party.

Over the next couple of weeks, the weather changed dramatically. The last warmth of autumn faded quickly and was soon replaced by snow and cruel winds. Although she still doubted the squirrel would be as well of as she seemed to think, Mina could not help but hope that Lyse would not need to take her up on her offer. They had had less than a month in their new home to gather the supplies for winter. The acorns they had gathered since the party had helped a lot and Mina was confident that they had

enough to make it. That didn't mean it was going to be pleasant though. She rationed out the food carefully and continued sending out foraging parties, even though they often returned soaked, trembling from the cold and with little more than scraps to show for it.

Despite her skepticism, Mina could not deny that Lyse seemed to be doing fine. She didn't see much of the squirrel as she often spent days away from her tree, but each time she returned she looked as fit as ever while the rats were all getting steadily thinner. At one point Mina had tried to press Lyse for more details as to where she was getting her food but, in typical squirrel fashion, she had refused to discuss it. It hurt a little that her friend was prepared to let them all go hungry rather than risk revealing how she was getting food, but Mina did her best to accept that Lyse had already allowed them to take all the acorns and tried to persuade herself that the mysterious food source was something that provided only enough for a single squirrel.

As the weather turned colder, Mina started going foraging herself. When they had first moved in there had been too much that she needed to supervise within the nest but most of that was sorted now and she couldn't justify sending others out while she stayed inside and warm.

It was nearly dawn and she was just heading back from one of these trips with a small pouch containing some roots she had managed to dig up when she heard a familiar call. Glancing up she grinned and waved at the squirrel above her. "You're up early. Are you coming down or do I have to climb up?" she asked.

In answer the squirrel skidded down a tree trunk to land just a few feet away. "Hey, sorry I missed you. I told Fiss to tell you I'd be back in a few days."

Mina walked over to join her, sweeping the layer of snow off a tree root so she could both sit on it. "Off on another of your mysterious journeys? I'm just coming back from mine." She dumped the pouch she was carrying beside the tree root as Lyse joined her. She hesitated, wanting to ask again about the squirrel's food supply but knowing that if she did Lyse would get annoyed and probably leave. On the other hand, she also knew that she was not the only member of the colony who had noticed that the squirrel seemed to have a plentiful supply of food that she was keeping to herself. Several of the others had already asked her to try asking Lyse again and that discontent was only going to get worse as the winter wore on.

Lyse noticed the rat's hesitation. "Something on your mind Mina?"

"Eh, just nest politics." She replied.

"Ah. None of my business, then?"

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Mina assured, “Come on, after everything you’ve done to help us, you’re as much a member of our nest as I am.”

Lyse seemed to think seemed to think that was amusing. “I’m pretty sure I’d have to be a rat for that.”

Mina shook her head, feeling a touch hurt that Lyse had taken the heartfelt comment as a joke. “Of course not, besides how much difference is there really between us? Squirrels are basically just tree rats. You have a fluffier tail than mine and are a better climber. But other than that, you’re pretty much a fellow rat. I would definitely consider you part of our colony if you wanted to be.”

Lyse still looked skeptical “I think there’s a few more differences than that. Our sleeping schedules are completely different. You can see in the dark and have a better sense of smell than me, but I’m faster and a little stronger. Not to mention of course that squirrels and rats taste very different from each other.”

“I ... what?” Mina stared at her friend. She had been about to plunge into an explanation as to why the listed differences were trivial and made no difference to her being a part of the group, but the last one had derailed that. “Taste?” she protested weakly.

“Yeah, squirrels have this really unpleasant aftertaste, probably from all the acorns most of them eat. You rats, on the other hand, have got a kind of rich earthy flavor which I’ve always found to be much more agreeable.”

At this point Mina tried to get up from the root but the squirrel wrapped one arm around her, leaning closer in what could have been a friendly hug had the subtext not been so ominous. “S ... so that’s the big secret then? You don’t need acorns because you get through the winter by eating your own kind?”

“Well, not so much my own kind. I do eat my fellow squirrels on occasion, usually when one of them tries to cut in on my territory, or if I want to extend into theirs, but I don’t enjoy it as much and it’s always a struggle to keep them down. Mice, voles, the occasional small bird if I can catch one, all of them taste much better than squirrels. And of course, plump little rats are always a welcome treat.” She pulled Mina a little closer and the poor rat whimpered a little as she heard a faint rumbling from the squirrel’s belly.

Normally Mina would have dismissed this as a tactless joke or perhaps some cruel prank to get revenge on her for prying into the squirrel business but there was nothing humorous in Lyse’s voice and the revelation just fitted too well with so many small details. “That’s why the nest was deserted, isn’t it?” she whimpered, “You told me owls got them all but the real reason you knew where we could find an empty nest because you’re the one that emptied it?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t tell you it was owls. I only said that there used to be more owls in this area than there are now. Any conclusions you reached from that are not my fault.”

Mina could feel the tears starting to well in her eyes. “And that’s why you invited us, isn’t it? You never cared that we were lost and needed help, you just wanted an easy meal.” Part of her still clung to the hope that Lyse would deny it. To admit that she ate other rodents but then say that she genuinely liked and wanted to protect the group she had offered to share her tree with. She tried very hard to hold on to that hope but already knew it was not the case.

“I guess it’s instinct.” Lyse told her, “Most squirrels bury nuts around their tree for the winter. I might have a different diet but there’s still a strong compulsion to have a few months worth of food stashed away where I can easily reach them.”

The tears began to flow freely down Mina’s cheeks. “So we were never really friends then? You just saw me as a stupid and easily manipulated meal all this time?” In some ways the betrayal felt worse than the realization that she was likely going to die soon.

“Remember when we first met? I asked you if you were lost and you told me you were looking for somewhere for your entire colony to live? You didn’t realize it but you were about ten seconds from going down my throat when you mentioned that.” She seemed to notice Mina’s tears for the first time. “That doesn’t mean I don’t like you though. I’ll admit I’ve grown rather fond of you since we met, but that doesn’t change things between us. I’m a carnivore, despite my species, and you are small and tasty looking rodent.” She stood up, pulling Mina to her feet alongside her. “And I’m sorry, but it’s time.”

Mina wriggled helplessly but couldn’t break the squirrels grip. Even for a species that spent almost every waking hour climbing through trees, Lyse was very strong. “Wait! Please! Don’t do this! There are roots in my bag. You could eat those if you are hungry. There’s lots of food back at nest you could have. It doesn’t have to be me!” she screamed.

Lyse pulled her closer. “I don’t like roots any more than I like acorns. I don’t want the limp dry plants you have stored in your nest. I want meat. Soft, warm meat, still kicking as I swallow and tasting of you.” She curled one leg behind Mina’s while she spoke and, once she had finished, gave the rat a little shove, sending her sprawling into the snow.

Mina squeaked as she landed on her back in the icy mush and struggled frantically to get back up, but it was already too late. Lyse dropped to her knees with one leg on either side of the poor rat, straddling her with her butt brushing against Mina’s belly fur. Again Mina tried to sit up but Lyse pushed her shoulders down, forcing her to lie in the snow, before laying her own body on top and taking her first taste of the squirming prey.

As Lyse licked at her face, Mina felt the fight go out of her. Sure she could kick and struggle but the squirrel had already proven herself more than capable of overpowering her. Instead she allowed herself to enjoy the sensations. The squirrel's body was warm and soft, a very pleasant combination in contrast to the snow she was lying in. She raised one arm, slipping her hand behind Lyse's head and turned her face so that the lick the squirrel had intended for her cheek came down on her lips instead.

At first Lyse had tensed up. She had been expecting to have to fight the rat, and was ready to pin her down again. Then she relaxed, gave a brief but pleased churr, then pressed her lips to Mina's in a passionate kiss.

For several minutes all Mina could think of was that kiss. The discomfort of the snow, the terror she had felt just seconds ago, all of it melted away within the squirrel's warm embrace. As the squirrel's lips teased and played across her own, Mina ran her paws down Lyse's back feeling the silky fur run between her fingers and the lithe power in the toned muscles of her back. Then, just as Mina was preparing to go a little further than playful petting, Lyse broke away from their shared kiss licking her lips from the leftover taste. "Oh Mina, I wish we could have done this some time when I wasn't hunting. Ah well, there will be other times, I guess. Be a dear and hold still would you?"

Suddenly, Mina found herself staring up into far more pink and salivating squirrel maw than she had ever wanted to see. She did not hold still in the least, but it soon became apparent that Lyse hadn't really expected her to. Gripping the rat's head with both hands she began to guide Mina's muzzle up into her jaws.

"No! Please! Not this! Not yet! There might be other times for you but there aren't any for me. Please! Not like this!" She screamed.

To her surprise Lyse suddenly let go. "No other times ever?" she asked incredulously, "Of your entire colony, you've never once slept with any of them?"

Mina took a couple of deep breaths, trying to calm herself to the point where she could speak after coming so close to being consumed. "No." she squeaked after a few choked attempts. "No other times ever. This is the closest I've even come to ... well, anything."

"I ..." Lyse hesitated, "Okay, I'll admit, it seems a bit cruel to make you die a virgin when I could so easily solve that for you. On the other hand," Her stomach gave another soft rumble. "I am kind of eager to get started. I've have been looking forward to making a meal out of you since We first smet and, after getting such a good taste, I'm not really in the mood for anything but a squirmy rat breakfast."

Mina gave her captor a pleading look. She had still been hoping the sex-then-realize-I-like-you-too-much-to-eat option might still be on the table. "This really doesn't have to be a one time thing, you

know.” she offered, “I won’t tell anyone what you eat and we could slip away every day to be together?”

An amused smirk played across Lyse’s muzzle. “Mina, you’re wonderful in many ways, but deception is not one of your strong points. You’d tell everyone about me. The moment you got back to your colony you would make sure every one of them knew to stay away from me and why.”

Mina tried to deny it but, as Lyse has said, she had never been very good at lying. The squirrel interrupted her protests by pushing one finger to her lips. “Ssh. I doesn’t matter now anyway. I’ve already made up my mind.” she paused for a moment to give Mina a chance to feel the suspense. “And I’m sorry, but as much as I would like to be the one to pop your cherry, I can’t really see you as anything but food at this point. No more protests now, my stomach was ready for you several minutes ago.” Once again she opened her mouth and began working the rat inside, only this time she showed no signs of stopping.

Mina screamed as the pinkness filled her vision. She shouted every possible thing she could think of, insults, pleas, desperate promises. Even after she passed the point where her voice was too muffled to make out the words she continued to scream in vain. Soon enough the squirrel’s lips stretched around the entirety of Mina’s head, flattening her ears against the predator’s hard palate and forcing the end of her muzzle to tilt downwards into Lyse’s waiting throat.

Grabbing Mina by the shoulders, the hungry squirrel maneuvered them both til she was sitting cross-legged in the snow and Mina was in her lap. Dimly Mina realized that this position was deliberate, either meant as a slight compromise on Lyse’s stance of her being food instead of a lover, or meant as a cruel reminder of what she was now never going to experience. Neither one seemed particularly important to Mina, she was far more concerned by the rate at which her shoulders were being crammed into Lyse’s jaws.

She kicked her legs as best she could, hoping to land a lucky hit on the stronger rodent, but Lyse gripped her tight around her thighs and then lifted them upwards in time with a massive swallow. Mina’s breasts were forced into the mouth as her head slid further down the squirrel’s esophagus. Another shove and gulp and most of her torso followed inside.

Mina sobbed helplessly. There was nothing she could do. With every swallow Lyse lifted her legs a little higher and her head slid a little deeper. She could hear the beating of Lyse’s heart and the rumbling of the waiting stomach, already louder than anything from the outside world. Another few swallows and her head pushed through into the muscular sack where she would spent the rest of her very short life.

Mina gasped in the stale air as she entered the stomach, and immediately wish that she hadn’t. She could taste the corrosive fluids on every breath, a fine vapor that got into her lungs and made them start

to tingle from within. Moments later the squirrel swallowed again and Mina found her nose pushed beneath the pool of acidic juices that had gathered at the bottom. She shut her eyes and held her breath. The stuff only tingled a little at the moment but she had no desire to find out what it would feel like anywhere more sensitive.

Outside the squirrel Mina's kicks grew a lot more frantic. Faced with the possibility of drowning she gave up any coordinated attempt to hurt the predator and flailed in a blind panic. None of this did anything to deter Lyse, if anything, the fact that her meal was no longer deliberately trying to kick her only made things easier for the predator. Mina's bare butt was flashed briefly towards the sky as Lyse tilted her head back before being eagerly gulped down. Another few swallows from the squirrel and Mina found herself being curled up in the tight sack, her nose rising above the surface as her shoulders were pushed under. Relieved, she took another deep breath of the foul air, barely caring that it made her insides tingle.

By now there was not much of the poor girl still outside. Her legs went down quickly, the knees giving Lyse a moment's trouble but nothing more. Her hind paws twitched a little as the squirrel's tongue ran over them, but there was nothing she could do at this point. Lyse's lips closed around them, careful not to let the rat's claws scratch the roof of her mouth, then she swallowed.

Now only the tip of Mina's tail remained, dangling from her jaws like a piece of string. Lyse left it there, reluctant to finish off her meal so soon. Standing up she admired the taut bulge her breakfast now made in her midsection. The food was curled up pretty tight in there, but she could still see outline ripple gently as the contents fought against her, she could certainly feel every move her prey made. Putting one hand on her swollen tummy, she gave Mina a little squeeze and felt the struggles inside redouble for a moment.

"Well Mina, you were absolutely delicious," she commented, "Still, all good things have to come to an end." With that she slurped the last her prey into her mouth. A satisfied smile crept across the squirrel's lips as the tip of the tail vanished between them. For a second or two she swished the rat's hairless tail in her saliva, enjoying the last taste she would get, then tilted back her head.

As if aware of what was happening, the tail suddenly looped itself once round her tongue. Lyse grinned. It was probably just a reflex, she knew, but it amused her to think that this might be a last and very desperate attempt from her food to pull itself back up. It didn't work of course. Lyse untangled her tongue from the tail with ease, slurped the twitching strand to the back of her mouth and, with one final swallow, sent the very last scrap of Mina slithering down her throat and into her belly. The sphincter that separated her stomach from esophagus closed tight and her belly gave an ominous gurgle. With the prey now sealed completely inside digestion could begin in earnest.

Lyse brushed a few traces of brown fur from her lips and sighed contentedly before heading back up the tree trunk. Climbing wasn't easy with such a large and wriggly passenger but she was well

practiced in handling prey and had little difficulty in reaching the top of the tree. After choosing a comfy looking branch, she sat down to watch the sun rise and wait for her breakfast to settle.

Gently she traced Mina's form beneath her fur, whispering a few soothing comments to help comfort the terrified prey. Her belly rumbled again as more gastric juices flowed in. Leaning back, she draped herself in a relaxed position, closing her eyes and focusing her attention on the movements coming from inside her. The rat was kicking as hard as she could but that wasn't very hard. There simply wasn't enough room inside Lyse's stomach for her to do much more than twitch.

"Ssh. It's over. No sense in fighting it any longer." Lyse murmured to her meal. "You're in your proper place now, where all good rodents eventually wind up. Don't resist. Just let my stomach do its job." Lyse rubbed at her belly in time with the words, making slow circles over the shifting pattern of bulges beneath her fur. "Pass out. Break down. Turn into mush. Turn into me. I know you still want to survive but it's far too late for that now. You're just food and will soon be nothing but a layer of fat to help me through the winter." A particularly hard kick came from within her belly accompanied by a furious yell, but it was too distorted by the surrounding muscle and sloshing acids for Lyse to understand.

She laughed at her meal's continued attempts to resist. "I already told you, that's not going to help. In fact, the faster you use up your strength the sooner you'll be ... Urg." A brief wave of nausea interrupted the squirrel. "Excuse me a moment." Lyse rooted around in her mouth and fished out a couple of long brown hairs that had been tickling the back of her throat. After checking that there weren't anymore she wiped them away on the branch and went back to her playful rubbing.

By now the struggles had started to die down, replaced with pitiful sobbing. Lyse sighed, normally she quite enjoyed this bit but this time it was a little less pleasant than normal. "I did mean it when I said that I liked you." She confessed, "You had a kind heart and were always looking out for others, Mina. I'm sorry I see you as prey but that's just the way it is. Rats like you are food and even the nice ones are still just a meal for someone in the long run. I'm not sorry I got a few days to get to know you before this, though. You were a good person as well as being a pleasant meal." Her little speech did nothing to calm the crying rat down, but Lyse felt better for having said it. Deciding to leave her breakfast in peace for a bit, she stared out towards the horizon watching the sky change hues as dawn began to spread.

The sun was fully above the treeline by the time her meal started to settle. The first Lyse noticed was that the struggles became weaker the pauses between them were getting longer. Glancing down she gave her belly another rub. "Almost finished in there?" she asked.

The response was a kick but it had far less force behind it than the previous ones. "That's okay, you lasted for quite a while. You don't need to feel bad about passing out now, everyone succumbs in the end, you're just doing so a little sooner than most. Besides, delivering eleven other tasty treats to me more than makes up for it."

That comment seemed to reinvigorate her prey a little and the rat started squirming almost as hard as she had on first entering the stomach. Lyse wasn't fooled though, she had eaten enough people to know the difference between strength and desperation. There might be more force to the kicks than there had been but they lacked in both coordination and stamina. "Come on. That hasn't helped so far." she chided, "Why would you think it will now? You're meat. Accept it."

She could feel the last of the rat's strength fading away. "Nearly over now." She comforted, "Just another minute or so and that will be the end of you." Of all the hunting process, this was probably Lyse's favorite bit. Feeling her prey surrender. Feeling them use up their last few moments of consciousness then relax as nothing but limp meat for her to digest. Of course, having someone she knew in there made the whole experience that little bit sweeter. Mina hadn't quite reached the point of surrender yet, but she was very close.

Even now, she was still trying to survive. Lyse could feel the rat's nimble fingers running one last time round her inner walls, hopelessly seeking some undiscovered way out. She could feel her kicking involuntarily from the lack of oxygen. The long tail tickled her inner walls a little as it writhed about. Another spasm and the girl's cute rear made a brief indentation in the curve of Lyse's belly.

Just for a moment, Lyse was sorry that she had not taken up her breakfast's offer. Mina had been quite attractive and it would have been nice to show the young girl a thing or two before bringing her life to an end. Still it was too late for that now. Lyse had made her decision and the poor rat girl was just a meal to her.

Inside Lyse's hot belly, Mina had finally reached her limit. Out of air and out of energy she gave a final defeated shudder and went limp. She wasn't getting out. Her exhausted mind had finally accepted that fact and she passed into unconsciousness knowing that she would never wake.

"Well, goodbye." Lyse noted as the last of the movement stopped. "It was nice knowing you, and even nicer eating you. For what it's worth I won't need to go after anyone else in your colony for several days thanks to this." Closing her eyes she stretched out in the early morning sunshine. It wasn't very hot, but it was still an improvement over the usual chill of winter.

For a couple of hours Lyse simply lay back and dozed, the meat in her belly gradually starting to break down under the onslaught of acids and digestive enzymes. Her stomach had long since adapted to her chosen diet. She might cough up a few chunks of fur over the next few days but everything else, flesh, bones, nails and teeth, would all be processed by her guts. It would take a couple of days but, by the end of it, there would be no trace of Mina but a few stray hairs and a little extra fat on Lyse's body.

A few days later she returned to her tree. Fiss was the first to give her the tearful news. She offered her condolences, promised to keep an eye out, and even joined one of the organized search parties. All the

while she was eyeing up the tasty looking rats and trying to decide which of them would be the first to find out where their beloved caretaker had gone. After all, Mina had told her she should come to them if she ever got hungry. It was going to be a very easy winter.