

Berry Brave – Part One

The world was a big, huge, and very frightening place. It was even bigger and even scarier to something as small as a faife. For a faife, everything could be dangerous. When he'd been little, Berry had ambitiously believed that he would overcome those dangers. He'd dreamed of being an intrepid explorer, a brave adventurer, a fearless warrior. Then he'd gotten too close to a cat's water dish and all his big dreams vanished in the quick gulp of the monster's swallowing his ear. He'd fled back to curl up shaking and terrified at his para's side, and he'd stayed safely in the shade of the great tree ever since. His thirst for adventure had been drowned in his own blood. The spotlight couldn't tempt him anymore, he was safer in the shade.

The autumn afternoon found the purple faife examining the tiny fruits for which he had been named. He couldn't tell if the berries dangling so temptingly from the prickly branches were properly ripe from his position on the ground. Climbing the spindly bush would be dangerous, and he really didn't want to do it if the berries *weren't* ready. Unripe, or even too-ripe, berries would only make a faife sick. They needed to be as sweet as possible for a faife to stomach them. Human sugar was the best food, but it was also the absolutely most dangerous to acquire. Flowers could be managed. Berries were okay. Safer was better than sweeter, or at least that was what Berry's para would say.

Swallowing, Berry finally conceded that he would need a closer look. Trembling faintly, he wrapped his paws around the spindly trunk and slowly scooted himself upward. The plant swayed even under his tiny weight and Berry was sorely tempted to give up before he fell. Steeling himself, the faife coiled his tail around the branch for extra assurance and climbed onward. The small thorns poked at him but they weren't sharp enough to make him relinquish his anxious grip. It only took him a few minutes to reach the first of the shiny, dark berries. Cautiously he stretched forward and took a tiny nibble from one corner. It *was* sweet. Still a bit tart compared to the delicious sugar he'd had once when he was very small, but definitely sweet enough to eat.

Berry wiggled the berry he'd nibbled off of the stem and tucked it carefully into the pouch slung across his shoulders. With an edible one on hand to compare, it was much easier to collect several more of the ripe ones. By the time Berry's pouch was full he'd climbed far enough out on one of the branches that it had dipped him back towards the ground. Carefully, he slid himself from the end of it to land in the grass and the flinched as, without his weight, it whipped quickly back up into its original position. Berry looked down at the half dozen berries packed into the sling and grinned. Some of the tribe were still raising their little fae, and having food brought to them would make it a lot easier for the new parents. And maybe he had enough that he might trade one to the grizzled Shura for more tales of her adventures. Awkwardly, for he hadn't yet learned to walk on two legs, Berry adjusted the sling and began his short trot home. The great tree was never out of his sight and it took him less than a half hour's trek to be among the tribe again.

"I brought-" he began, then quieted. Something seemed to be amiss. Most of the tribe was out of sight, and those who were about were quick and quiet. Berry flattened anxiously, accidentally crushing some of the juice from his collection of berries. He slunk quickly through the grass and over the thick roots to where his parents could be found. Dark blue and indigo Plum was huddled close to the speckled Raz, and Berry let go of a relieved breath when he saw that his parents seemed to be all right. "Para?"

"Oh baby!" Plum squeaked, abandoning her mate's side to dart forward and pull Berry into a hug that crushed him *and* the rest of the berries he'd collected. "We were so worried!"

“What happened?” Berry asked anxiously. He tucked himself closer to his para's side, too worried to care about the sticky berry juice staining his fur.

“A predator,” Raz said softly, crossing their small shelter to nuzzle both Berry and Plum reassuringly. Berry shuddered at his para's words. A predator was bad. It was even worse than bad winds or high waters because a predator didn't stop until it had a faife, or something else, in its greedy stomach. Wind and water would go away in time, even if they were scary and could be dangerous. But predator... a predator always meant death.

“D-did... did it...” Berry tried to ask, but it was too awful. Plum squeezed him tighter with a stifled sound and Berry's stomach tied into knots.

“It almost got Smoldering,” Raz answered softly. “Cookie managed to get her away. But, she lost her horn.” Berry stared at his para, then buried his face in Plum's shoulder as his yellow eyes welled up with tears. It almost might as well have eaten her. Her escaping only bought her a few more days to say goodbye.

“We thought, when we couldn't find you-” Plum choked, and Berry felt his para's sobs against his fur.

“I'm okay,” he managed, it was very difficult to breathe through her embrace. “I-I was just getting food.” That reminded him that his berries were very much crushed now, and he squiggled to free himself from his para's grip. “I-I'd like to, um.” A look at the pouch proved that the berries had mostly been squashed beyond recognition but some of the pulp still clung to the dark skins. They might not look as nice, but they would still taste the same. “Smoldering and Cookie don't live far from us,” he said, fidgeting nervously as he looked up at his parents. “I-I'd like to bring them these. If that's okay.”

Plum looked about to protest, but Raz reached forward and ruffled Berry's good ear. “I think that's a good idea,” his speckled para said warmly. “But they've gone down to the rose.” Berry's eyes went wide and he had to duck his head quickly to hide the fresh temptation to cry. Smoldering was bad enough, but if they'd gone down to the rose then Cookie was going to be gone too.

“Okay,” he said instead, hugging Plum again as much for his own reassurance as hers. “I-I'll... I'll go see them there.” Raz nodded, the speckled faife taking over the task of hugging Plum as Berry crept to the entrance of their small shelter. He peered cautiously out, checking left, right, and up twice each before he slipped out and trotted around the tree towards the rose.

The thorny rose plant was starting to go bare with the season's turn, but its thick and winding branches would still give any predator pause. The safety of the thorns, though which a small and agile faife could easily slide, was what had caused the tribe to designate the rose as the place for new faife to be born. A baby faife was helpless, rooted to the earth as it slowly bloomed from the buried horns of its parents. It couldn't be moved until it had been born, so it needed to be put in a safe place. Berry spotted Cookie and Smoldering nestled under the twisted rose. A few other tribe members were there, and he paused in the shelter of a small shrub to give them some privacy. Only after the others had started to leave did Berry creep forward to see his friends.

Smoldering looked awful. Her fiery fur had been cleaned recently enough to still look damp,

but it was missing in chunks and poultices had been packed along her shoulder, neck, and face. She lay against her mate's flank and barely looked up at the sound of Berry's hesitant steps. Cookie was coiled around his mate. The lack of herbs and marks made the flatness of his head all the more strange, and Berry couldn't help but stare at the brown faife's lack of horns.

"I-I-" Berry tried, but his voice squeaked away. It had always been a bit hard for him to speak to people. Seeing the state Smoldering was in, knowing the gravity of the situation, it made it so much more difficult. "Berries," he managed, trying hard to fight the tears that threatened again. It was miserable to see his friends and know that they were as good as dead. A faife without horns had only a few days left to live. He knew when his para had told him what to expect, but seeing the roundness of their heads had made it horribly real. "I found some, only, only they got squished a little," Berry said, slinking nervously towards the pair. "They're ripe though," he added, wiggling out of the damp pouch and sliding it towards the older faife.

"Thank you sweetheart," Cookie said softly, leaning forward to butt his head affectionately against Berry's without moving from his position at his mate's side. Berry couldn't remember a time when Cookie and Smoldering weren't side by side. He didn't think he'd ever seen them apart. It only made sense, he supposed, that they would bury their last horns together even if it was an early burial.

"I-is this..?" Berry asked, pointing at a small mound of earth. Cookie nodded, and Smoldering smiled at him.

"Isn't it amazing?" the fiery faife asked softly. "Already the fae is being born, just out of sight in the earth." Cookie nuzzled her as she spoke, and Berry pawed awkwardly at the dirt under his toes. He wanted to ask who would take care of it, since its parents would be dead even before it turned fluffy, but it felt wrong. Berry looked at the mound for a while before the answer came to him abruptly.

"Where's its sibling?" he asked, then cringed at his accidental question.

"Tack is with the Blue Guardians," Cookie replied. "They won't be back until, I'm not sure. Midwinter perhaps."

"But-" Berry choked, swallowing the protest. It would be too late. Midwinter would be far too late. That was too cruel, Berry thought miserably. Their child was a hero, it must be if it was a Blue Guardian. But because Tack was a hero, because Tack was brave and selfless and had dedicated itself to protecting the tribes and clans, because of these *good things* Tack was doing... Tack wouldn't get the chance to say goodbye.

"It's all right," Smoldering murmured, settling to rest her chin on Cookie's flank and closing her eyes. "He belongs in that clan. He would have stifled in the quiet with us." Berry understood that. The thrill of adventure had proven too much for him and he'd been quick to give up when that dream had become a nightmare full of hungry monsters. But just because he'd been too frightened to reach for greatness he'd not stopped admiring those who had the courage. It felt wrong that Tack's bravery was to be rewarded by never seeing his parents again. Berry didn't want to imagine how he'd feel to come home and find Plum and Raz were gone.

He didn't have anything more he could find to say to Cookie and Smoldering. He stayed with them for a while, trying to soak them up into his memory for when they weren't there anymore. As evening came, he slipped away home and curled up with his parents. He had never appreciated them as

much as he did in that moment, knowing that once day he might be the one to get the gut-wrenching news that one of them had lost their last horn. At least he'd be there with them though. He never went far enough that he'd miss his chance to say goodbye.

As the night crept on, Berry found that he couldn't sleep. He was safe and warm tucked in against his para's soft flank but all he could think of was Tack. Berry was pretty sure he remembered Tack, just a little. Tack was older than he was, and had been so much braver. He was almost never around now, being an adventurer probably kept him very busy. Too busy to say goodbye? Berry doubted it, no one was so busy that they wouldn't want one last chance to see the ones they loved.

Berry couldn't take it. Silently, careful not to wake his parents, he crept out of their shelter and slunk anxiously through the darkness to where Shura kept her vigil. Shura had lost an eye, a horn, half of a paw, and one of her back legs fighting a predator that got into some other clan's territory when she'd still traveled with the Blue Guardians. She couldn't travel with them now, she could barely walk, but even being crippled hadn't made her soft. Berry spotted the grizzled tri-color faife perched on an upcurled root, her one eye gleaming in the moonlight as she kept her silent watch over the resting tribe.

"Shura?" Berry called quietly, not wishing to startle the crippled hero. Her ear flicked, but she didn't look away from her watch.

"All is quiet," Shura replied, and Berry took that as invitation to scramble up beside her. He looked at the tattered scrap of blue cloth she wore around one forelimb. The mark of the Blue Guardians always filled him with a mix of awe, admiration, and just a bit of envy. He wished he could find the courage to be one of them. He'd wanted nothing more all his life. Even now he had no new ambitions, just the trembling fear that followed him in every shadow and rustle.

"Shura, how did you find the Blue Guardians?" Berry asked, awed at his own nerve. That he was asking almost made the insane idea that had been nibbling at his thoughts real. He wasn't sure he could handle that. He didn't know what he'd say if Shura asked him why. She spared him the anxiety by answering,

"They travel in a great spiral." She lifted her mangled paw and pointed towards one of the bright stars just visible on the edges of the great tree's leaves. "From our territory, you must put that star at your left shoulder to find them in the time of turning leaves." Berry looked, trying to figure out how to tell which star it was when she wasn't pointing it out to him. "But you must move quickly, or you will not reach them in time." Berry startled, looking back towards Shura in wonderment of how she'd guessed at the intentions he wasn't even sure he had. Her gaze was not on him, her lone eye still surveying the space beyond the great tree for any signs of trouble.

"O-okay, thank you Shura," Berry said softly. The faife inclined her head in the barest of nods, and Berry took that as gratitude received. He slithered from the root, landing with an awkward squawk on the ground. "Tell my parents?" he asked her. He was afraid that if he tried to tell them himself Plum would convince him not to leave. Berry was still waiting for *himself* to convince him not to go. Shura nodded again, and Berry turned away from the great tree. Watching the sky, he spun in a small loop until the star was on his left. And then, too afraid of losing his nerve to look back, he sped through the grass and into the dark forest beyond.