



Berry slept straight through into the second day after his return with Tack. He woke groggy, sore, and hungry enough to eat a beehive. His long sleep had not been enough time for his para to calm down, and Plum was still quite beside herself that her little fae had gone off alone into the dangerous world. Especially that he had gone alone into the dangerous world beyond their tribe's territory *without telling her*. Berry gobbled up the dried fruit pieces and listened to her voice as she fretted and scolded, trying not to choke on his food when she kept grabbing him into hugs on every “And I was *so worried!*”

“I’m fine, para,” Berry protested, though the fact that his everything hurt too much to want to move didn’t lend much credit to his words. “Nothing dangerous happened at all.” It was almost disappointing really. He had been so terrified to go, but the story of his adventure was actually just a series of minor panics over no actual threat. Part of him had hoped to have a tale to tell like Shura’s, or Tack’s, but his errand had been just an errand. It would be an embarrassment to tell. First he’d been scared of the dark, then he’d been scared of the human’s empty thunder-monster path, then he’d been scared of an owl that wasn’t there, he’d been scared he went the wrong way and got lost, he’d been scared the Blue Guards would hate him or make fun, and then he’d been scared that they would be too late getting back. None of the things he’d been scared of had been worth the fear, though he’d felt it far too strongly to deny that he’d been scared half out of his mind the entire time, and the big nothing that happened made him feel worse than being scared had. Being scared for nothing was worse than being scared for good reason and, looking at his adventure, Berry couldn’t even say it made him feel less afraid of the idea of ever doing something insane like that again, ever. And Para wasn’t helping.

He wound up dozing through the rest of the second day, and woke up to somber news in the evening of the third day back. His para Raz crouched in beside him and explained very gently that Smoldering and Cookie had passed away. “Already?” Berry squeaked, shocked that the time was gone.

“You did a good thing,” Raz told him, lending Berry a hand when he tried to get his feet underneath him. “Tack was with them because of you.”

“But I-” Berry started, then shut his mouth. He’d wasted time. A lot of time. He spent most of a night hiding in the bushes when there had been nothing to hide from. All those hours Tack could have been with his parents before they perished were gone because of Berry. Guilt gnawed at him and made Berry regret the fruit he’d consumed the day before. He knew he ought to confess, but he just

couldn't bring himself to do it. "I wanted to say goodbye," he finished meekly when Raz continued to watch him expectantly. That was also true, just not what he'd been going to say. Berry had liked Cookie and Smoldering. They had been part of the tribe for longer than he'd been alive, they were kind and generous and so in love it made the grand romance tales storyteller faifes told seem paltry in comparison. Now they were gone.

It felt like the world should be different somehow, but when Berry dragged out of the shelter he shared with his parents the evening birds were singing goodnight. Stars weren't yet peeking through the twilight, the sun was still painting the sky, and everything seemed to be going as it always did. Berry walked between Raz and Plum, though his para fretted and worried that Berry wasn't ready to be walking around and should be resting, and they settled together on the outskirts of the group. Cookie and Smoldering were being buried under the crying tree that grew on the other edge of their small field, it's gnarled roots twisting down into the river on one side. Berry could just make out the hole dug in the roots. He knew that both faifes would be curled up inside it, nestled in among seeds and blooms from the summer's last flowers, but he couldn't bring himself to go and look. It would be too strange to see them laying so still. Instead, Berry studied his paws as the clan said their farewells.

The sound of falling dirt made him flinch, and he looked around to see if anyone else had noticed his cowardly reaction. No one seemed to be paying him any mind. "I'm gonna... I'm tired," he mumbled to his parents.

"Okay sweetie." Plum crouched down beside him, petting his nonexistent mane. "You want me to walk you home?"

"No para, I can do it," Berry replied quietly, slipping out of her hands and creeping away from the crowd. He didn't want to go home though. Instead, he slipped away to wander through the grass of their clearing without any real direction. His body was still tired, but the long sleep had brought him through the worst of the aches and pains, leaving him only stiff and a little bit itchy. The bottoms of his paws were a bit rough but it seemed like they were callousing now. If he ever decided to do something crazy again, like go for a three-day run, his feet would be more prepared.

Without meaning to, Berry found himself by the rose again. It looked different at night, there was something spiky and unfriendly about the shape of the vines in the cold brush of moonlight. Berry stared at it, his eyes wandering until he found the place where Cookie and Smoldering had lain so close together. There was someone there. He was startled for a moment, then remembered that the blooming fae couldn't be left unattended, not even for a farewell ceremony. What surprised him was that Tack was the one who was watching over it. Berry was sure he'd seen Tack at the ceremony, he'd been a small brown figure next to the gap in the roots, but the ceremony couldn't be over yet. Which meant... Tack had left early too?

Berry stood in the dark, watching the other faife move slowly around the little sprout. He couldn't see what Tack was doing, maybe digging? Or straightening bits of leaves away? Berry felt like he should talk to him, the Blue Guardian looked so small and alone underneath the twisted rose. But Berry didn't know what to say. He stood where he was as Tack settled down beside the tiny bumpy patch of earth that was where the sprout must be. He should go to him. Someone ought to, Berry didn't think Tack deserved to be alone.

A small noise behind him alerted Berry to the dispersing of the faifes from the ceremony. Surely someone else would go spend the night with Tack. Someone more qualified. With a last glance,

Berry slunk away to be home before his parents could find him gone a second time. He feigned sleep when they came in, feeling too mixed up to talk to them or anyone else. They whispered to each other over his head for a while, and then Berry found himself tucked in between them again. He was too upset to feel silly being snuggled between his parents like a fae when he was old enough to look after himself. Berry buried his muzzle in Plum's dark fur, breathing in his para's scent until he finally fell asleep.

Things seemed to be normal again the next day. There was something subdued in a lot of the faifes' tones, but there was always work to be done and life went on. Berry, who hadn't experienced death since he was a little fae almost too young to remember, found the whole thing to be very disquieting. He gathered up a pouch and, with a thousand reassurances to Plum, slipped away from the tribe to go gathering again. He wanted to miss Cookie and Smoldering for a little longer, but not in the way the others seemed to be with stories and bouts of laughter. He wanted to be quiet. He wanted to curl up in the cool dirt under a bush and remember the way they talked. The way they looked at each other. The pride they had when they spoke of their little one in the Blue Guardians. He wanted to remember the thousand little things that he had never thought of before, the thousand little things that he would never notice again, and he wanted to be somewhere he could cry about it without anyone seeing him do it.

He spent a couple hours being sad before he'd gotten enough of the feeling out to get up and do what he'd said he was doing. He still felt worn out inside, but at least now he didn't feel like he was moments away from a breakdown. Berry found the bush he'd climbed the day he left, quickly picking out a few clusters of the dark berries along its prickly vines. Climbing made his feet hurt a bit, but it was a good distraction from the guilty feelings of how he'd been so afraid of nothing, or how much of the time he'd wasted in his fear of nothing. Berry filled his pouch quickly and climbed down with care. The vine still sprang back and clipped his jaw when he moved his small weight off of it, and Berry whimpered at the sting. He felt pathetic for reacting to such a small injury, just as he'd been pathetic to hide from a predator who wasn't there, or pathetic to be too afraid to talk to the Blue Guardians.

As he traveled back to the tribe, he fretted again about what the others would say if the truth of his adventure came out. He'd spent it so frightened, and nothing had happened. Nothing. Berry hoped fervently that no one ever thought to ask him exactly what had happened. He wanted to go see Shura again, but, as he thought about it, he was sure she would probably ask him about it. After all, Berry was forever asking Shura for tales of her adventures. She might think it was his turn to tell a story, and his story was humiliating. Instead of going to visit the crippled veteran, Berry instead headed up to the rose to see Tack. The action reminded him of the day only a week ago when he'd brought berries to Cookie and Smoldering at the same spot, and Berry had to pause in a clump of tall grass to be privately sad again before he could press on.

Tack was laying beneath the rose beside his little sibling's sprout. Berry stared at him, awed by the way the Blue Guard sprawled peacefully in the grass. It was impossible to tell that this was anything out of the ordinary for Tack. He'd left his Blue Guardians and come home to bid his parents goodbye for the last time. He'd buried his parents only last night, and now he was all the family the helpless little sprig of green had. And yet, there he was, calm and peaceful in the sun beside his growing sibling. Berry knew he'd never have handled such a huge change so well, and he was more than a little awed at the fortitude of his heroes as he crossed the last patch of grass to join Tack beneath the rose.

"H-hello-" he started, only to be badly startled by Tack's launching to his paws.

“Wait!”

Berry froze with one paw raised, his fur all fluffed out in a surge of panic as he fought to remain motionless. His throat worked but he couldn't make the words come out as his eyes darted to find the source of Tack's alarm. As it turned out, he needn't have looked so hard.

“Don't step on it,” Tack said, pointing out the tiny tendril of green peeking out of the small mound of dirt.

“I won't,” Berry promised, and finished placing his paw down in the grass several inches away. “I brought some berries in case you were hungry.”

“Oh, thanks, but I- Oh no!”

“What?” Berry squeaked in alarm as Tack reached out and hauled him to the side.

“Your shadow,” the brown faife told him, “The sprout needs to get plenty of sun or it won't do well.”

“O-oh.” Berry looked down at his and Tack's shadows, now pointing beside the sprout. “I, sorry, I-I didn't notice.”

“Just be more careful okay?” Tack pleaded, and Berry stared at him.

“Did you... sleep?”

“No,” Tack replied as if it were obvious.

“Er, shouldn't you sleep?”

“I have to watch the baby,” Tack told him, now pacing in a half-circle around the sprout. Only half a circle though, he stopped before he got to the point where he'd cast a shadow on the little sprig of green. “What if something happens? What if it gets too cold? Or if a leaf blows over onto it and I'm asleep and don't notice right away? It could get hurt!”

Tack, now that Berry was close by, did not look all that well after all. The look of peace when Berry had seen him laying back beside the sprout had been an illusion. The Blue Guardian looked more jittery than *Berry* and that was not an easy feat to accomplish.

“I-I didn't know I could've hurt it!” Tack continued, still pacing back and forth for a moment before flopping over to lay on his back beside it. He curled his dark-toed paws up to his chest and just stared at the sprout as he had been when Berry first came up to him. “I put a cloth on it,” he confessed, his voice slightly higher pitched. “Plum was so upset when she saw it! I only wanted to make it a Blue Guardian like me, but what if I bent a leaf? What if I kept part of it from getting enough sun? Or enough air? What if I made my baby sib into a-a *faeling*?”

“Um. I don't think it happens quite like that-”

"Maybe not!" Tack said, sitting up so fast Berry startled and wound up sitting himself. "But only maybe! And if something *else* goes wrong, oh no no no..." Tack rolled forward to his paws and paced back and forth, carefully surveying the sprout again. "Is it too dry?" Tack asked Berry, who gaped at him. "Or too wet?" The brown faife very carefully patted the mound of dirt as he spoke. "How do I make it less wet? I can make it more wet but I don't know how to make it more dry!"

"It's very green," Berry offered timidly, "I think it's probably okay if it's green."

"Is it the right amount of green though?" Tack asked, and Berry was again lost. "Is it looking a little yellow? Or brown? There's brown on it!" Tack cried and covered his head with his forepaws. Berry crept a bit closer and peered at the little plant.

"I think that's dirt," he said finally, now looking at Tack in alarm. The faife was on his belly with his chin pressed into the ground and his eyes too wide as he stared at the sprout without blinking. "I-I... will be back," Berry said finally, backing carefully away from the sprout so his shadow wouldn't fall on it. Tack was whispering something, or whimpering, as he tried to brush off the small flecks of dirt at the base of the sprout's stem.

The run to the healer's roots in the little evergreen on the clearing's edge was surprisingly easy. Maybe he'd gotten tougher on the trip after all. "Spritely?" he squeaked, peeking his nose inside. He heard someone sneeze near his good ear and almost had a heart attack. "Spritely c-can I, o-oh. H-hello Marigold," Berry choked, staring at the solemn gold and black faife. She glowered down at him as though he were something icky that she had accidentally trod in. "I-I was looking for S-spritely?"

"Spritely is busy," Marigold told Berry disdainfully. "We need to restock some sugar for the idiots who are too busy to eat and come here to waste our time with fainting spells and dizziness."

"I have sugar," Berry said quickly, relieved to have actually been prepared for something, even if it had been accidental. "Here, is this enough?" he asked, passing his pouch of berries to Marigold. She examined it, then snorted.

"I suppose it will do for today," she said, slinging it over her shoulder. "Spritely left a short time ago, you might want to hurry."

"Thanks," Berry squeaked, turning and darting out from under the arched root of the sharp-smelling evergreen. Remembering Shura's vigil, he clambered up to perch on top of the root, surveying the grassy area for any sign of the foundling healer. He spotted her just at the forest's edge. Berry bounded thoughtlessly off the root, landing with a squeal in a tangle of limbs. That hurt more than he'd anticipated. Dazed, he worked his way back to his feet and bolted through the grass to catch up to her.

Marigold and Red were both good healers, but Spritely was *nice*. She was also good at secrets, and Berry had a feeling this was something that should be quiet. "Spritely!" Berry called as he galloped into the shade of the woods. "Spritely?"

"Yes?" Berry jumped as Spritely seemed to materialize out of a bush at his shoulder. How a faife with her coloration could blend into the shadows was beyond him, her pale fur and warm orange markings should have stood out in every setting but a flower field.

"I need your help," Berry told her, and Spritely chewed her lip.

"Marigold sent me to get more sugar," the citrus faife started anxiously and Berry jiggled from paw to paw.

"I got it for her already. But, please, I think Tack needs help and I don't know anything about babies and he's... really upset," Berry blurted out. That caught Spritely's attention.

"What happened?" she asked urgently, the sling on her shoulder forgotten as she turned and started to run toward the rose bush.

"Nothing!" Berry squeaked, racing to keep up with her long-legged stride. Two legs made for much faster travel than four when they were so much bigger, and not for the first time Berry wished he'd managed to learn how to change shape himself.

"Nothing?" Spritely repeated, slowing her pace to something more relaxed that Berry could actually keep up with. "Then what's the matter?"

"It's... it's Tack," Berry explained anxiously, "H-he thinks something's going to go wrong and I d-don't... I don't know how to take care of a sprout." Berry turned his yellow eyes pleadingly up at Spritely. "But you do! C-can you teach him? I-I... I think it would really help..."

"Oh." Spritely frowned, then smiled. "It's not hard but, sure, I guess I could go over it."

"Thank you!" Berry bounded a step ahead. "I-I'll make it up to you! I'll bring Marigold sugarfood all weak so you don't have to!"

"It's not that big a deal but I won't say no to that," Spritely replied.

"Don't tell anyone though?" Berry added uncertainly, "I-I think Tack's not well, I... I don't think he'd want everyone to know..."

"Oh is that what this is about?" Spritely asked, glancing sidelong down at Berry. "One of your heroes having a breakdown."

"Spritely," Berry whined, and she laughed.

"All right, all right, I got it," Spritely assured him as they approached the rose. "If you're worried about that though, maybe you should go head home so we don't crowd him in his, uh, 'moment of weakness'." Berry paused, then nodded reluctantly. He still wanted to help, but he hadn't wanted anyone around when he was having his breakdown. He imagined Tack would probably feel the same.

"Oh, um, Spritely?" Berry squeaked. She paused to look over her shoulder at him. "Don't get your shadow on the baby."

"Are you serious?" Berry nodded, and Spritely clapped a hand to her forehead. "Oh stars, okay, then I know what the problem is."

"Already?" Berry asked. Spritely nodded.

"New parent," she said wisely, and Berry frowned. "It happens a lot," Spritely explained, "Fae are really fragile when they're little. But it's not as though they're at death's door every second. Really, nature does a pretty good job of handling itself, but when you don't know much about the process it's very worrying."

Berry was worried too as he watched Spritely cross the field to the rose. He gasped when she walked up past the baby and made Tack leap to his paws to frantically point out the shadow. Spritely crouched, taking both his paws in her hands and sitting him back onto his haunches. Berry couldn't hear what they were saying, it looked a bit like they were having some sort of an argument. He hoped it would be okay. Spritely was the nice healer, she'd be able to help for *sure*. Or he hoped she would. Berry hunched down in the grass, watching mournfully as Tack only seemed to get more upset. Suddenly it occurred to Berry that he was intruding anyway. He had passed his pouch into Marigold's hands, but that meant now he hadn't gotten food for Tack or his parents, or Shura. Gathering was a good excuse, he'd be busy with that for a while and it was important work to be doing.

It didn't take him as long as he'd hoped to collect a new pouch and go out into the woods to where he knew there were more bushes. He liked berries best, and they were easy to come by in this season. Spritely found him on his way back into the tribe's clearing with his refilled pouch.

"He's okay," Spritely told him before Berry could ask what happened. "He might appreciate a snack now that he's calmed down. And, if you're not too busy, maybe you could hang out with the sprout while he takes a nap or something."

"You think *I* w-would be- you want m-me to, to watch T-tack's baby?" Berry stammered. Spritely crouched and grabbed his cheeks in both hands as she leaned forward.

"It's really, really, really not that hard Berry," Spritely told him, her dark eyes millimeter's from his. "I swear, it doesn't even move. Just sit there with it, and if something happens wake Tack up and he'll handle it."

"Okay," Berry managed, and Spritely ruffled his almost-mane before she stood up.

"You got this buddy. It's a lot easier than tracking down the Blue Guardian's beyond the tribe's borders."

"B-but that wasn't hard..." Berry mumbled, hoping she wasn't going to ask for the embarrassing story. Spritely just grinned at him.

"Then this will be a cinch," she told him. Berry watched her walking away back to the crooked pine the healers had made their headquarters, then slunk nervously through the grass towards the rose. It even looked sinister to him in the late afternoon light now. Tack was still there, laying back beside the sprout as he had been when Berry found him earlier.

"H-hi," Berry squeaked, wondering if Tack was going to be mad at him. Tack hadn't asked for Berry to get his nose all up in Tack's business, or to get someone else to witness his breakdown.

"Hey," Tack said, rolling over and sitting up. "Thanks," the brown faife said, smiling sheepishly. "I kind of lost my head there for a bit."

“O-oh.” Berry had been hoping to not get yelled at. He hadn't expected to be *thanked*. “Uh, I-I kinda, uh, lose my head a lot.”

“I guess everyone does,” Tack said, and chuckled. “Mind watching my little sib for a bit? Healer said I need to sleep, so.”

“Y-yeah, sure,” Berry agreed, not sure if he should tell Tack that Spritely had sent him for that purpose.

“Thanks.” Tack stretched out on his side, staring at the sprout.

“I-it's no big deal,” Berry mumbled, taking off his pouch so he could settle more comfortably on his haunches.

“It is,” Tack said. Berry stared at him a moment, then hunched his shoulders. He didn't know what to say again. “You know, I didn't even recognize you when you got up on that stump.” Berry hunched more, feeling like the air had been let out of him. “You came all the way out there to get me when we didn't know each other, and you saved my tail again today. I always thought everyone back home was a bunch of boring heel-draggers but, eh, stuffs a lot more complicated here than I thought it was.”

Berry started to protest, then bit his lip. He didn't want to argue with Tack about it, not when the faife obviously needed to sleep.

“I think trying to babysit is the scariest thing I've ever done,” Tack mumbled, his eyes slowly drifting shut. “Being responsible is-” The brown faife yawned hugely. “It's hard,” he finished. Berry wasn't sure if he ought to say something or not, and if he ought to speak then he wasn't sure what he should even say. Tack's breathing slowed and evened out while he was trying to decide, and Berry gave up.

Tack was definitely right about responsibility being hard. Berry felt more on-edge watching the quiet, peaceful little sprout in one of the safest spots in the tribe's territory than he had felt on the whole journey to get Tack. Even hiding under the bush from the owl had been less intense, or so it seemed now. Berry hung his head at the memory. He should still confess the wasted night, every time it crossed his mind it felt like something was chewing on his insides. Those hours had been worth so much to Tack and his parents. And Tack was *thanking* him. Would Tack feel that way if he knew how much of their last days Berry had thrown away by being a coward?

The unpleasant thoughts did plenty to keep Berry awake and alert while the Blue Guardian caught up on sleep. Spritely had been right that it was easy to watch the baby. Being honest about his pathetic adventure was proving so much harder.