

THE GREAT SQUIRELLI BROTHERS



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Imagine, the biggest, darkest, scariest forest you've ever stood in, with tree's so tall and bushy that they block out all the light on the ground below, and where the animals creep around in the darkness, making strange noises.

Now imagine the opposite of that.

That's Zen Forest.

It's not dark or scary, it's just a lovely big friendly forest (most of the time) - and the only strange noises you hear is laughter.

It's where Poppy and Zander live.

Poppy is a Polar Bear and Zander is a Gander, which is a male Goose - as he likes to remind everyone - and they're the best of friends.

Polar Bears and Geese normally don't live in forests, but this is Zen ... and things are different here.

Zander looked around at the broken picnic tables in the forest clearing, then to Poppy in her sparkly purple leotard, back to the tables, then back to the leotard.

“If you’re trying to teach yourself acrobatics”, he said, “it’s not working.”

Poppy slumped onto the grass. Her shoulders fell forward and her head dropped all the way down to her feet.

“They say practice makes picnics”, she mumbled “now that’s 11 tables I’ve broken”.

“I don’t think anyone says that” replied Zander, “it’s practice makes *perfect*”.

Zander placed his wing under her chin and lifted her head all the way up, until she was looking him straight in the eye.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

Poppy took a long, deep breath. She was having trouble getting the words out.

“I’ve always had a dream” she mumbled, “that one day I could become an acrobat”.

“You’ve still got time”, Zander reassured her.

“I dream of doing standing forward flips,” continued Poppy, “and cartwheels that go on forever.”

“That won’t be too hard to learn,” said Zander.

“And the high-wire” Poppy smiled broadly, “I want to be the world’s first tight-rope Polar Bear”.

Zander cleared his throat nervously.

“High-wire you say” the words seemed to get stuck in his beak, “that might be a little diffi-”

“And the Flying Trapeze!” she interrupted him, “I want to leap from the trapeze and have someone catch me!”

Zander looked at her - she was an extremely large bear. He thought long and hard about what to say next.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” he flapped into the air and landed on her shoulder “let’s go out there and do it!”

“There’s no point” she replied sadly “I’m too big, I’m too clumsy and my leotard is the wrong colour”.

“Now you listen to me,” Zander sounded angry, “you are not too big, you are not too clumsy, and your leotard ... yeah, okay, we’ll change the leotard. Now I know just the fella’s who can help us Poppy.”

Poppy smiled hopefully at her best friend.

“You do? Who?” she asked standing up, “will they train me?”

“Don’t you worry, these guys are the best in the business. The finest acrobats in the whole forest ... of course they’ll say yes!”

“It’s a big no for your big friend”, yelled Franco Squirelli in his Italian accent. His tiny yellow vest looked ready to pop from his tiny squirrel chest. “Are you trying to kill me and my brothers?”

Behind Franco, his 3 brothers practiced a full routine of daredevil moves. It was a blur of red fur, big eyes, and yellow vests.

“Come on Franco,” pleaded Zander, “she just needs a break.” Zander was wearing sweatbands on his head

and wings and had a whistle around his neck. For some reason, he thought he should look like a Sports Coach.

“She will break my back”, wheezed Franco, “have you not noticed that I am a Squirrel and Poppy is a Polar Bear?”

Zander looked over his shoulder at Poppy who was peeking out embarrassedly from behind a tree.

“Well, I suggest you change your name”, Zander replied “to the average Squirelli Brothers. Or the Nothing Special Squirelli Brothers”.

“You listen to me”, yelled Franco angrily, “if we tried to catch her, she would stretch our beautiful squirrel arms from the top of the tree to the ground below - like spaghetti. They would call us the Great Spaghetti Brothers”.

Zander liked the Spaghetti name better.

“Yeah, you’re right,” said Zander “a little tiny Squirrel like you could never handle a Polar Bear”.

Zander turned to walk away, but Franco shouted him back.

“Hey, you, bad actor bird” he yelled. “Come here!”

“It’s fine, I’ll just go ask the monkeys”, Zander continued to tease Franco, “they’re pretty strong”.

“That’s it!” Franco tore off his vest to show his muscles underneath, “no monkey is going to teach that Polar Bear. I will teach her.”

“You will?” replied Zander, “that’s great news!”

“Now, before we shout Poppy over”, he said, “what kind of pupil is she? Does she pay attention and do as the teacher tells her?”

“Oh, she’s the best, she never rushes into things without taking care or gets distracted”.

Zander looked down at his webbed feet shuffling guiltily from side to side.

“Good,” replied Franco, “shout her over”.

Zander waved Poppy out from behind the tree.

“Is that a banana peel on her head?” Franco seemed confused.

“Yes” replied Zander.

“Why is she wearing a banana peel on her head?”

“She wears it when she’s embarrassed” Zander replied proudly, “it makes her invisible”.

Franco’s eyes flicked between the deranged Gander in the sweatbands and the Polar Bear wearing the banana skin ... and wondered just what on earth he was getting into.

Later that day ...

Normally, the Forest pond was like a busy waterpark.

Every day, Ducks and Swans swam gracefully around the surface, whilst bickering with each other. Young Frogs slid down great big overhanging leaves like flumes, splashing into the pond below and annoying their parents. Around the water’s edge, animals would gather

to dip their hooves and paws, and catch up on the forest gossip.

But today nobody was in the water. The pond was empty. It probably had something to do with the Polar Bear balancing unsteadily on the branch, high above it.

“I’m not sure about this” said Poppy as the branch trembled beneath her.

“This is how you become a great acrobat” replied Franco Squirelli, ignoring the fear in her voice. “We don’t have a safety net - we have a safety pond”.

Franco leapt from the side of the tree and landed on Poppy’s branch, making it shake.

“Now what I want you to do, is a perfect back-flip” he said quite casually.

Poppy just stared at him.

“Could you repeat that please?” she mumbled in disbelief.

“You. Back-flip. Land. Ta-dah. Take a bow.”

It didn’t sound any better the second time.

“This branch isn’t very wide”, Poppy informed him.

“It’s very wide.” Franco replied.

Poppy’s paws suddenly slipped, and she tumbled from the branch down into the pond below. The splash was like a tidal wave; it sent all the animals scurrying for safety and washed 2 Ducks down a Rabbit warren. As she swam to the side and clambered onto the verge, she noticed a single frog still on her lily pad, clinging on for dear life.

“That’s odd”, thought Poppy, “I wonder why she didn’t just dive in and swim away”.

“Don’t worry Poppy” continued Franco, “you’ll have worked it all out before the show tomorrow night”.

“Show? What show?”

“Tomorrow night we perform for the whole forest,” answered Franco, “didn’t Zander tell you?”

The next day, Poppy trained harder than she’d ever trained in her life. She didn’t want to let Franco down - he’d been very patient with her; even after Zander threw her a choc-ice and she dropped Franco to catch it.

Poppy spent every waking moment twirling, vaulting, flipping, rolling, springing, diving, and swinging. As the show drew closer, Franco was genuinely amazed at how Poppy had applied herself.

“Poppy you’ve trained like a champion athlete”, he told her proudly, “now, we must master the stunning finale.”

“What finale? Nobody told me there was a finale” she sounded scared, “and what’s a finale?”

“The finale is how we bring the show to an end with our biggest stunt”.

Poppy tried to give Franco a confident smile, but her knocking knees gave the game away.

“Don’t worry Poppy” Franco reassured her, “you will be swinging on one trapeze, I’ll be on the other - all you have to do is let go, and I’ll catch you”.

“You’re going to catch *me*?” asked Poppy in disbelief.

“Yes,” replied Franco, “all you have to do is concentrate and put your trust in me.”

The performance ...

“Knock knock,” said Zander as he tapped on Poppy’s cave door, “can I come in?”

“Yes,” replied Poppy.

Zander entered the cave to find Poppy sitting in the middle of the floor. He could see she looked nervous.

Outside, the forest crowd gathered with excitement and waited for the show to start.

“I don’t think I can do this”, cried Poppy, “what if I mess it up?”

Zander sat beside his best friend.

“There isn’t a thing you could do, that would make me think you messed up,” replied Zander softly, “you could drop all the Squirelli brothers, somersault into the crowd, and set fire to your cool new yellow leotard and I would still call you my hero, and everyone will still cheer because they’re your friends.”

Poppy wiped away a tear and smiled at him.

“What yellow leotard? I don’t have a new leotard”.

Zander pulled a box from under his wing and handed it to her.

“Yes, you do.”

As darkness fell around the forest, the spotlights went on, and the big show started.

Zander took his place in the crowd and watched his best friend Poppy and the Squirelli Brothers put on the show of their lives.

Every animal that gathered stood open-mouthed, gazing skywards at the stunning display of acrobatics taking place high above their heads. When the show was almost over and the finale drew closer, Zander closed his eyes and whispered –

“Come on Poppy, you can do this”.

High up in the tree, Franco Squirelli walked to the end of a branch, puffed out his Squirrel chest and dived off with his arms outstretched. The crowd gasped. Franco’s tiny squirrel hands caught the trapeze and in one death-defying move, he flipped over and dangled upside down by his legs.

“Now for the stunning finale,” he yelled like the little furry showman he was, “it’s called – how to catch a Polar Bear!”

The crowd whooped with delight.

Poppy walked to the end of the branch, her legs were trembling, and her paws were shaking. She looked down to the crowd below and caught a glimpse of Zander, smiling encouragingly towards her. She could still hear his words in her head.

“I will still call you my hero, and so would everyone out there, because they’re all your friends”.

She remembered what Franco had told her.

“All you have to do is concentrate and put your trust in me.”

Poppy looked out across the treetops; miles and miles of green leaves stretched in every direction – and felt a sudden calm descend over her.

“Okay Poppy”, said Franco swinging towards her, his little furry face smiling upside down, “get ready to jump”.

Poppy inhaled a giant Polar Bear breath, watched Franco swing towards her, closed her eyes, and jumped.

Down below, Zander held his breath too as his friend leapt through the starry night sky. Franco swung towards her, his little Squirrel hands reached out and found Poppy’s just in time. Instantly, an enormous cheer filled the cool night air as every animal on the ground whooped, screamed, and applauded their appreciation. It was the loudest cheer ever heard in Zen Forest.

Zander eventually breathed again.

“You did it Poppy,” he said quietly, “you did it.”

That was the day Poppy became an acrobat and made herself prouder than she'd ever been before.

And what a day it was.

Poppy learned lots of new things and was reminded of things that she already knew.

If you dream of doing something, no matter how far away that dream may seem, you can always achieve it if you're willing to work hard for it. But you've got to apply yourself, you must focus, and give it your all.

Sometimes, you'll doubt yourself. You'll think you can't achieve it. But you can't let doubt stop you from reaching for your dreams ... and when someone offers you help you've just got to take the leap and trust that you're in safe hands.

But most importantly, Poppy was reminded that even when you don't believe in yourself, your friend's belief in you can give you the strength and energy you need to go out and succeed.

That's what friends are for.



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