

NINE

There were six cherry trees in a cluster at about the distance Foxy estimated. It didn't take long for the pups to decide they loved cherries as they got their muzzles sticky from the sweet juice of the ripe bright yellow fruit. After they had their fill, they took a turn keeping an eye on the surrounding forest for danger as the adults worked to fill their backpacks. After a while, they grew bored.

"Dame, may we go play?"

"Keep within site of the cherry grove," Birch replied wigwagging her tail in warning. "There could be predators about."

"We promise!" They chittered in unison and began a game of tag/chase through the nearby trees, being careful to not stray too far from the cherry grove.

The lead pup suddenly skidded to a halt when she almost collided with another squirrel, nearly causing both of them to lose their grip on the branch. The pup panic-screed and fled back towards the cherry grove, her two siblings following closely behind her.

The stranger stared at the fleeing pups a moment in total surprise. "Pups, here?" he mumbled to himself. "Wait! I no bite!" He called after the fleeing pups. "Please stop!" He gave chase. Another squirrel quickly joined him.

"What is it?" the second male asked, keeping pace with the first.

"Squirrel pups, littermate."

"Pups?! Here?"

The first flicked his tail up and down once. "They flee towards cherry grove." He raised his voice again. "Please, pups, no flee! We no bite! I wish to speak!"

None of the three pups headed the calls behind them as they quickly made their way back to their parents and grandmother, chittering a warning cry. "Strangers come! Sunrise direction!" They quickly scurried over near the adults. Their father paused in his work and gathered them together protectively, putting himself between them and the newcomers.

Birch and Foxy paused in their work and looked to the east to see two adult squirrels on a branch of a nearby tree staring back at them. The newcomers looked similar to Pinecone and Tassel having peppery gray fur and rounded ears. The newcomers stared at the strange looking squirrels with orangish-red to reddish-brown fur and tasseled ears. They wigwagged their tails nervously. Finally, one of them chittered, "Is cherry grove still truce area?"

Foxy and the others physically relaxed. They flicked their tails up and down once in the affirmative. "Come," she called out. "Plenty cherries for all. You no bite, we no bite. Is always truce here."

The two newcomers cautiously worked their way over to the same cherry tree. They all sniffed each other briefly.

"We thought we last to survive," the newcomer the pups had first seen stated. "One your pups nearly knock me off branch."

"Is good we no last squirrels," the other added.

"Do you mean survive the predator bird attacks of last harvest time and winter?" Foxy asked.

The newcomers flicked their tails up and down once in the affirmative.

"That long story and no our story to speak," Foxy replied. "We live with those who survive attack. We come to this forest after ours burned." (drooptail) "No many survive fire. Was like in biggen origin story, fire hunt/eat all above ground. We only live as we flee into woodchuck burrows. I, Eldest of those who survive fire. I take name, Foxy. This my pup, Birch," she pointed to Birch with her tail, "her mate and pups. They no take names yet."

"Foxy will be part of our name when we choose names," one of the pups said whirling his tail proudly.

The newcomers nervously wigwagged their tails. "Names? Like biggens?"

"As I speak before, is long story. Come, eat your fill. Then we go back to Elder Council. They explain better."

The newcomers hungrily dug into the ripe fruit, though they nervously glanced at the others and the strange biggen tools they filled with cherries. The pups huddled together chittering quietly among themselves, all thought of further chase games forgotten. They nibbled on cherries now and then while keeping an eye out for possible predators. As their parents and grandmother finished filling their packs and strapped them on, the pups begged for attention, which was given to them.

"What is it, my pups?" Birch asked.

The first born among them, the female that nearly collided with one of the newcomers spoke for the three of them, a half-eaten cherry in her forepaws. "We have chosen names, Dame." She scuffed a paw on the branch briefly. "Well, my littermates had already done so. They wait for me to choose one before we let you know." She quickly finished the cherry. "I love these so much, it will be my name. I am Cherry Foxy."

Birch hugged her. "Very well, Cherry it is." She looked at the other two.

“I look much like Granddame Foxy,” the other female spoke. My fur is as red as hers, so I choose name Red Foxy.”

Birch hugged Red. “Is good name for you, Red,” she praised and then glanced at her son.

He scuffed a paw. “You choose my name for me already, Dame. Long before I could chatter, I was always first awake to nurse. You say I always bright eyes. I take name you give me, Brighteyes Foxy.” He whirled his tail proudly.

Birch hugged Brighteyes, praising his name. All three then looked to their father. He looked down briefly and then back up. “I no ready chose name yet,” he chattered.

All three of his pups group hugged him saying it was alright.

All through this, the two newcomers remained quiet and watchful. They didn’t say a word as they fell in behind the others and followed them towards what they knew had been biggen territory the previous year. They looked to each other briefly, but in that look they agreed they would follow these strangers even if they entered biggen territory. It was a risk, but better than being alone.