

ELEVEN

Foxy and her family looked about as the others departed. “Cherries no stay fresh long after harvest. Cherries no like nuts. Come, we’ll place the cherries in Kind’s and Sunshine’s cool midden. I think they keep longer there. We surprise them when they return.”

They entered the biggens’ tree and went into the kitchen space, opening the refrigerator and piled the two remaining backpacks filled with cherries within on a shelf. The cherries within the third backpack had been eaten while Tassel and company spoke to Tassel’s lost sons.

“I wonder what Sunshine will make with the cherries?” Cherry mused.

“Yes, is strange how biggens cook their food,” Brighteyes replied. “I think that word Elder Voice Friend used for how biggens use heat to change their food.”

Red flicked her tail up and down once in the affirmative. “That is word he use. Some cook food is good. Some strange.” She paused a moment as she gazed inside the cool midden. “Look at all the room in here! We could put three more backpacks with cherries in here, maybe more!”

Red, Cherry, and Brighteyes were all for going back to the cherry grove and harvest more cherries. What more could the adults do but agree with the enthusiastic pups. Others from among the fire survivors arrived asking about the cherries, so Foxy and company led a small party of squirrels to the grove. Between harvesting and eating, they picked the six trees clean of ripe cherries within a pawspan of time. They estimated there would be more ready in three more days. Upon returning, they stuffed the cold midden tight with cherries. Two more backpacks wouldn’t fit. They placed one of them in front of the cold midden. One of the other squirrels took the other to share with others in the forest.

“Won’t Elder Kind and Sunshine be surprised when they get home,” the pups chanted in unison.

“Surprised about what?” Jessophat asked from the doorway as he entered with Carulin and Saniel right behind him. All three had backpacks on.

Birch and her mate nervously wigwagged their tails doing their best to fight down the instinct to flee as they moved to one side to give the biggen squirrels plenty of room. Their pups showed none of their fear as they excitedly bounced-up to the three larger squirrels.

“We harvest cherries today!” they chanted in unison.

Carulin looked to the three pups with cherry stains in their muzzle fur and then gasped as she looked at the backpack in front of her refrigerator. She gasped again upon opening the door, seeing how stuffed full within it was with more backpacks. She looked over at Jessophat and Saniel. “We’ll have to put what we brought home in the guest fridge.” Saniel nodded and headed down tree with his backpack. She turned to the pups and switched to chitterspeak. “Our one tree no grow so many cherries at once.”

“There are six trees, Dame Sunshine,” Red responded.

All three pups flicked their tails up and down once in the affirmative.

“A pawspan climb towards sunrise,” Brighteyes said.

“And there will be just as many ready to harvest in three days!” Cherry added enthusiastically.

Jessophat started laughing as Carulin glanced at him. He spoke in Common. “Tassel pointed them out to Foxy and me when we inspected the property two days ago. The grove is in the territory Tassel’s people claimed before we joined forces, hon.”

Quietly, Saniel returned and took Carulin’s backpack and departed again.

Carulin drooped her tail briefly. “I guess I busy tomorrow,” she chittered. She looked at the pups. “And if your dame lets you, you can help me.”

“We can?” they asked. They looked over to Birch, who hesitated a moment. She glanced at Foxy who flicked her tail up and down once. Birch then did likewise. They excitedly darted back to Carulin. “We can!”

“Come back tomorrow morning. You help me make,” she switched to Common, “jam.” She switched back to chitterspeak only uttering jam in Common as needed. “We will need to ask Friend if his people have a chitterspeak word for it. If no word, we may need to make one for it.”

“What is it?” they asked in near unison, their tails slowly wigwagging up and down, curling at the peak briefly.

Again, Saniel returned, taking his father’s backpack, and leaving.

“Is way to save fruit for whole year,” Carulin replied. She carefully opened the refrigerator fearing one of the backpacks might fall out and pulled a yellow jar off a shelf in the door. She opened it and let the pups sniff. “This is jam. My last from last year’s cherries. Stick a claw in it and lick.”

All three pups’ faces lit up after trying cherry jam. “Is cherries. Is sweeter than cherries. Is good!”

“And to make jam, I’ll need to wash all those cherries, remove any stems and all the pits. That’s where your help comes in.” She glanced over at Foxy, Birch, and Birch’s mate. “You can come sniff and try it, too. Jam is for everyone, no just pups.”

Foxy showed no hesitation as she came forward to sniff and try the cherry jam. “Birch and her mate still scared of you and Kind, Dame Sunshine,” she chittered quietly to Carulin. She sniffed the strange looking yellow substance. It smelled of cherries. She stuck a claw in it and licked it. It tasted like cherries but much sweeter. It was good just as her grandpups had declared.

Birch's and her mate's curiosity enabled them to fight through their fear and approach. They each tried the jam and liked it.

"This is good," Birch agreed.

Her mate flicked his tail up and down once. "Is good. I no think I could eat a lot at once. Very sweet."

Carulin nodded. "It is very sweet. Is only way to preserve it." She covered the jar and placed it back in the refrigerator. "Biggens spread it on other food."

Birch glanced at the others. "Come my pups! We should leave and let Elders Kind and Sunshine be. You three need to clean your fur of all that sticky cherry juice."

The pups bowed to Sunshine in thanks and then followed their parents out.

Saniel returned as the cousin squirrels departed. Carulin looked over at Jessophat.

"I don't have enough jars to process all of these. Even with their help to clean and pit them, there's too many. It would take me several days. I've never seen so many cherries at one time. Not even when I go to the store in town."

Jessophat shook his head in amusement trying not to laugh again. "Tassel is a much to blame as me. While we were showing Foxy the combined territory of The Refuge, Tassel was stressing about the fall harvest already. She's worried about it. I think it was because she wasn't expecting an additional fifty mouths to feed beyond our current group for this year. And it will be our first under a 'total truce' as she calls it. The harvest needs to be successful for the good of all in the colony. I think this was Foxy's way to show her people aren't going to slack off when the time comes. And to show how quickly they can harvest whatever is in season. They probably ate their fill before filling those backpacks based on how yellow the pups' muzzles were. And this was just the first round from only six trees. It didn't occur to me to point to the other grove that I noticed as we passed in the territory that Tassel's people originally claimed nor did I point out your coveted tree near the far end of what had been our property. Maybe there are other groves out there."

"Dad?" Saniel asked raising his tail to gain attention.

"What is it?"

"There's a small food processing plant in town. Couldn't we just bring all the cherries there? At least the ones that aren't going to be eaten right off?"

Jessophat's eyes widened. He had forgotten about the plant that sits idle until the fall harvest.

“Brilliant! Great thinking, Saniel.” Jessophat paused a moment. “However, I’ll need to discuss it with the rest of the council first. These cherries should be considered common property.”

“I will still make some into jam tomorrow or those pups will be disappointed.”

“Of course.”