

The morning after Blossom's return, Twig and Cherry Foxy arrived outside Saniel's and Blossom's shared drey. Saniel and Blossom were just finishing a couple of butternuts. Saniel glanced at one and then the other.

Twig looked downward briefly, grasping his tail. He used chitterspeak for Cherry's sake. "Cherry come to me the day Blossom go to Biggen colony and well..." He scuffed a paw.

"I hope it work for you two," Saniel replied in chitterspeak.

Blossom hugged her brother and then Cherry. "Energy, I invite them to come with us, plant stonefruit seeds." Blossom beckoned the group. "We go plant stonefruit seeds at near cherry grove. It will take many summers before they make fruit." She then quoted Elder Teacher, "Is our job to plant trees for those who come after us."

The others flicked their tails up and down once in agreement. It was a half-pawspan to the nearest cherry grove, the small one Cherry and her family had first harvested cherries in. To one end, there were several small mounds as others had planted cherry pits during the harvest here just like in the other groves. They paused in the canopy of one of the cherry trees looking about.

"Remember what happened to poor Sorel at the end of the cherry harvest," Saniel warned the others.

The three cousin squirrels wigwagged their tails nervously.

"I go to other side of clearing and keep watch from there," Cherry said. She looked at Blossom and Saniel. "You go first. Twig and I watch for predators."

The others flicked their tails up and down once. Cherry quickly made her way through the trees to the other side of the small clearing. She looked about carefully. "Clear," she called out.

Twig looked about as did the others. "Clear," he said to them.

"Remember what I looked up on the world network, Blossom. We need to plant the pits pointy end down."

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once. They each took a peach pit in their mouths and made their way down to the ground. From there, they paced off about ten cousin squirrel body lengths out past the fresh mounds. Each of them were about the same distance from each other as from the nearest row of fresh mounds. They each dug into the ground with their front paws. They paused, looking about nervously and then stuck their heads into the holes to deposit their respective pits. Upon pulling out, they brushed the dirt back over the peach pit and gently patted the ground. They quickly scampered back up the cherry tree rejoining Twig. Cherry was soon among them again.

"That was fun," Saniel said. "It felt natural to bury that pit just as I watched Pinecone bury butternuts during past harvest times."

All three cousin squirrels looked at him.

“You see twelve winters and no bury nuts before?” Twig asked raising his tail briefly in a curl.

Saniel wigwagged his tail left to right and left again in the negative. “My family store nuts in our tree for food and to trade with other Biggens. Sire and Dame use Biggen tools to plant nuts to grow new trees. I no bury nuts by paw before.”

They nodded in understanding.

“How long for stonefruit trees to grow?” Cherry asked.

“Like cherries,” Saniel answered, “need ten summers maybe more before stonefruit start produce fruit.”

“Long time,” she replied.

The others flicked their tails up and down once in agreement.

Blossom looked at Twig and Cherry. “Your turn plant stonefruit. Energy and I keep watch.”

Without being asked, Saniel made his way quickly to the spot on the other side of the clearing. “Clear,” he called-out.

The three cousins looked about from the cherry tree they were in. “Clear,” Blossom said.

Twig and Cherry made their way down the tree and out past the new mounds, pacing off as Saniel and Blossom had done. They looked about again wigwagging their tails nervously before burying their respective peach pits and gently patting the dirt into place.

“CHIT! CHITTER! SCREE! FOX! FOX! FOX!” Blossom cried-out. “RIGHT UNDER ME! FLEE TOWARDS ENERGY! CHIT! SCREE!!!!”

Twig and Cherry bolted towards the other end of the clearing. The fox was quickly behind them trying to snap at one tail and then the other. To their surprise, Saniel was quickly down his tree and ran past them straight at the predator. Fear drove them onward and up the tree. They cried out a warning of their own as they climbed quickly.

Saniel chittergrowled as he barreled into the fox. The fox yelped in surprise as the two tumbled end over end. Fur flew in the air. The fight seemed to end before it started with Saniel landing on top. He had the fox pinned to the ground with his mouth around its neck. The fox whimpered. It was on the small side for a cousin fox, barely larger than Saniel from nose-tip to base of tail. However, Saniel outweighed it. Another chittergrowl came out of Saniel as the fox tried to struggle briefly. It ceased struggling and whimpered again as Saniel tightened his mouth slightly. He panted heavily trying to catch his breath before delivering the killing blow.

“Saniel,” Blossom called down in Common. “Twig and Cherry are safe. Please don’t kill it.”

Saniel couldn’t believe what he heard. This fox may have been the one who killed Sorel and it had just tried to make her brother and his potential mate it’s breakfast. Why should he spare it? He grabbed the fox by the scruff of the neck with his right forepaw/hand and stood-up, opening his mouth to release the fox’s neck. As he stood up to his full Biggen height, he held it out by the scruff and barely had it off the ground. Again, it whimpered. However, it made no attempt to struggle.

Twig and Cherry both stared as they wigwagged their tails in fear and uttered another scree warning. Both had forgotten how big Saniel could be if he stood up on just his hind paws. It was not something he did often in The Refuge. He preferred to scamper about cousin-style on all four. Their scree set-off Blossom for a moment who let out a warning scree of her own as her tail also began to wigwag.

Saniel walked over to the base of the tree, fox in paw. He looked up at Blossom and the others in the cherry tree. “I don’t understand, Blossom,” he called up to her in Common. Twig between fear scree quietly translated for Cherry. “Why should I spare this fox.” He gestured waving the fox slightly about. “It just tried to hunt your brother and his potential mate.”

The fox whimpered again as the giant squirrel that held it uttered its strange sounds and shook it. It lost control of its bowels and bladder. Saniel wrinkled his nose as he was barely missed by the excrement coming out of the fox. “Arrgh! That reeks worse than skunk musk!”

“Saniel, it has no choice. It must hunt to live. As our parents teach us, we are prey. At some point a predator might catch and eat us.” Her tail shuddered. “We try our best to ensure that does not happen for as long as possible.”

Twig and Cherry flicked their tails up and down once in agreement. Both uttered another fear scree.

“And if I let it go, it might get you or one of your brothers tomorrow, Blossom.”

“I doubt it will stay in this area after this. As I studied for the senior school exam, most cousin species fear Biggens. It will flee when you release it. Look how scared it is right now. Also, remember the rules of our colony. If you hunt/kill it now when it is not in self-defense or saving someone else, you must eat your kill.”

Saniel drooped his tail as he stared at the fox in his grip. It whined again. He sighed. “You’re right, Blossom. But there is one thing I will do before I let it go.” He grabbed the fox’s muzzle with his left hand. It struggled unsuccessfully as he leaned over and nipped off the tip of its left ear with his incisors. The fox yelped. Saniel released the fox while leaping upward grabbing onto the tree trunk and quickly climbed, joining the others.

As Blossom predicted, the fox did not hesitate once released. It fled from the grove away from the direction of the populated portion of The Refuge. Saniel spat out the small ear tip. Blossom hugged Saniel. Twig and Cherry then each hugged him in thanks.

“That very brave thing you do, hunt then spare fox life,” Cherry chittered as she released Saniel from the hug.

“Why you bite off part of its ear?” Twig asked in chitterspeak.

“If another squirrel get hunted. I want know if same fox,” Saniel replied in chitterspeak. “If same,” his eyes narrowed a moment, “I will hunt/kill/eat it next time. Your namesake, Twig, saved my life last summer. It cost him his.” Saniel drooped his tail and fought back tears as he switched back to Common. “Now that I’m near full grown, if I can help it, no others will fall prey to predators in our forest.” The tears began to flow. “I wish I had been with Sorel’s group that day...” he trailed off as he began to sob.

They bowed to him in understanding. Blossom embraced the larger squirrel who wept into her shoulder. Soon all four of them were crying remembering the loss. Eventually, they all calmed down.

“Come, we must report this to Elders and warn others,” Blossom stated still sniffing a little.